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The Lightning's Stanley Cup

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Lightning's Stanley Cup
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The Tampa Bay Lightning won the Stanley Cup. The Canadian Holy Grail of Sport now resides in Florida where on the day of the final game it was over 90 degrees, with high humidity, a veritable tropical paradise. The Lightning are coached by an American, have three American players, three Czechs, two Russians, and one player each from Sweden, Slovakia, and the Ukraine on the roster along with fifteen Canadians. They defeated the first Canadian based team to appear in the Cup Final in a decade. Eat your heart out Don Cherry!

For nine of the first twelve years of its existence the Tampa Bay Lightning has been one of the worst, most inept, franchises in sport. Ownership kept changing, coaches kept changing, and players were in and out before they were known even by the most rabid of fans. In addition, they didn't have a building that could be called a hockey arena as they played in what looked like an old horse barn on the Fair Grounds where a capacity crowd was in the 10,000 range.

It may be something about the Tampa Bay area that encouraged this pathetic beginning. After all the Bucs didn't exactly set the world on fire in their first decade, and the Devil Rays are threatening to set new lows even for Tampa Bay.

Three years ago things began to change. Ownership stabilized and Bill Davidson brought some business and sport sense as well as money to the club. They finally had a new arena, although not one ideally suited to hockey. John Tortorella was hired to coach the team and was given longevity and authority and brought a willingness to challenge his young stars to dig in and find their great potential. And best of all no one in the front office was ready to trade their young talent at the drop of a puck.

Marty St. Louis and Nikolai Khabibulin both pointed out the importance of the fact that a core of players was kept together, and that they developed over the last three seasons by small steps. This is a mark of an organization with a plan, with confidence in the plan, and an organization that is willing to let the plan move forward always patient in their impatience.

In Calgary a similar story took place over the past few years. After the Stanley Cup win in 1989 the Flames slowly flamed out. The fans began to stay away in droves as the season ticket base faded. Finally, this franchise took hold of its self, developed their own plan, and built a team around some good, and one excellent young player, Jarome Iginla. This year in the playoffs it came together for the Flames.

Neither of these teams have large payrolls, as both in fact are at or a bit below the league average. Neither team resides in a major market with huge television and radio revenues or major revenues from merchandise sales. These are both modest franchises, competently run, with dedicated athletes ready to go out and give everything each night. These are franchises that people will pay real money to see.

Their similarities are reflected in the fact that over the seven-game series Tampa Bay scored one more goal than Calgary. When Brad Richards, the Conn Smythe Trophy winner (MVP), was asked in the post-game interview what made the Lightning better than the Flames his answer was perfect: "Better is a tough word. . . .It was the case of the last man standing." Barry Melrose put it this way: "These teams had the same amount of heart. Tampa Bay simply had more talent." He might have added that it was not all that much more. Game five went into overtime, game six went into double-overtime, and game seven was not decided until the horn sounded at the end of sixty minutes of hockey.

The final seemed to have nearly as many story lines as the Smarty Jones saga. Brad Richards tied a record with seven game winning goals in the playoffs, and in every game this season, including the playoffs, when Richards scored the Lightning did not lose, going 30-0-2.

Dave Andreychuk, at 40, was the oldest player in the final and had played more NHL games than anyone ever had without winning a Stanley Cup. In fact, he had never been to a final. This was an NHL record for the man who as someone noted was older than most NHL arenas.

Nicolai Khabibulin, The Bulin Wall, had a good series but not one without problems. When it was needed however he lived up to his name. He was nothing short of spectacular in the final nine minutes when the Flames played like a team possessed. Several saves and sequences of saves preserved victory during the onslaught down the stretch. Khabibulin was picked up three years

ago after he had been cast off by others who found him inconsistent and unreliable.

A strange pattern of victory began after the Lightning won the first game of the Philadelphia series as they were unable to put together two wins in a row again until Game six and seven of the finals.

As for the Flames their road to the finals necessitated defeating three teams who had amassed 100 points in the standings. The Flames did not have home ice advantage as they defeated Vancouver, Detroit, and San Jose. The Flames ignited and united Canada at least for a few weeks.

There is only one Stanley Cup winner at the end of the two and a half month second season in the NHL, and this year as in so many years, the margins of victory have been extremely thin. As for the prize at this highest level two observations by players are worth remembering. Several talked about the significance of having their name on the Stanley Cup forever, for their children and grandchildren to see. Marty St. Louis put it another way: "We will walk together forever."

This gets to the essence of sport for those who play the games, this is what the Stanley Cup means, and this is why it is important that there be a hockey season next October.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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