

## The Taste of Victory

by Kyle Kujawa

When the horn sounded in Syracuse, the party was on. The mob in the corner led way to a champagne-soaked celebration in the locker room, which sparked a mostly-sleepless night involving a plane ride back to Grand Rapids and a visit to a downtown establishment. After 100 regular season and playoff games, the Griffins certainly were justified in extending the festivities with their teammates, fans and loved ones for nearly three full days.

But just like that, they disbanded. The Calder Cup win is a memory that no player will forget, but chances are that the group will never be all together again. Some already have a ticket punched to Detroit next year, while others found new opportunities when free agency opened two weeks later.

For veterans like Jeff Hoggan and Francis Pare, the win is extra special. Hoggan, the team's elder statesmen at 35, won a Cup as a first-year pro but went 10 seasons without experiencing that again. He wondered if he'd get that chance before his body told him it was time to hang up the skates. Pare had given five years to the organization, setting all kinds of franchise scoring records but never finding satisfaction in playoff misses and exits.

"When you're younger, you don't realize how hard and long the road is," said Hoggan. "This year, I wasn't just worrying about my part in this. I took a step back and saw these guys improve as players and as people, and be rewarded with the Calder Cup. It was special for me and for everyone tied to this organization, and these young guys that we bled and sweat with. And what a way to end it, I'll tell you what."

"Just the emotions in the eyes of everyone," said Pare. "It was something else. You play 100 games together. You go to war every night. You get bumps and bruises here and there. You play injured or tired sometimes. You go out with these guys for beers or dinner. You meet their families. And that was it. I just threw my gloves up in the air and I felt like I was the king of the world."

Hoggan was vocal about his beliefs that this group could make a deep postseason run from the beginning of the season. That feeling resonated in the locker room all season, and as the Griffins entered the playoffs against Houston. However, it was certainly a team that had its fair share of adversity.

"I think that first game, it was the first playoff game for a lot of these guys," said Hoggan about the team's Game 1 loss to Houston. "The knock on teams in Grand Rapids is that they're not tough enough. Houston came out with the mindset to play physical. After the game, I think we were trying to figure this out, 'are we made for this?' We came back the next night hard.

"The fun started there and then."

"Good teams find a way," said Pare. "It went to a fifth game and we could have been done after that. But you know what, the 'Pesky Griffs' always find a way. We keep coming. We left no doubt with the 7-0 win, and we moved on after that."

Each round brought new challenges, but all followed a familiar script. In each series, the Griffins missed out on a first chance at elimination before getting the job done later on.

“A lot of these teams were extremely confident that they’d found a way to beat us,” said Hoggan. “I’d never call us soft, but I think some teams thought they would intimidate us physically. Looking at our roster, there are a lot of future NHLers on this team. But those teams saw how bad these guys wanted to win now, in the AHL. It just goes to show that all these guys play with an edge and play with passion.”

“We never made it easy the whole year,” said Pare. “Nobody ever panicked, and we just focused on the process and kept going. We knew we had it in the room to make it possible, and we did it. Everyone could smell it, and we kept chipping away.”

The AHL presents several unique challenges that aren’t found at other levels. First, the roster can change on a daily basis, and the Griffins saw that effect when Toronto’s lineup was bolstered by NHL additions, before getting a few players of their own from Detroit during the final two rounds. Secondly, the Griffins don’t play against the Eastern Conference at all, so all they knew about the Syracuse Crunch was that they were 11-1 in the postseason entering the Calder Cup Finals.

“We knew they were pretty good, most of the guys won the Cup last year,” said Pare. “But it doesn’t matter for the ‘Pesky Griffs.’ We just kept going one game at a time and focusing on what we can control. If you focus on what they’re doing, you won’t be ready. They have some great players, but we had better character in the room and it showed.

“I thought we always had good teams in my first four years,” he continued. “But we didn’t always play as a unit. This year, it was always someone different. They all saw the energy around the room, and these guys came down and wanted it just as much as I did. I’ve been here for five years, and Danny DeKeyser was here for six games. But you know, he’s part of the team, and a champ just like I am. We’re all brothers, and we made it together.”

Hoggan and Pare both faced a decision after the season, as veteran free agents. And while the Red Wings made a decision to keep as much of the winning group together as possible, signing the likes of Hoggan to a new contract, others decided to go out on a winning note.

“There’s no doubt this is a place you’d love to call home,” said Hoggan prior to signing his two-year extension with the organization. “I’ve got two kids and my wife out here. It’d be a no-brainer for me. I don’t know how many years I have left, but this one really relit the fire of how much I love playing this game. Getting the feedback and hearing people say ‘it was a pleasure playing with you’ was rewarding, let alone the Cup.”

“These are memories I will keep forever,” said Pare, who signed in Finland after leaving Grand Rapids. “I don’t even know how many goals I have scored here now. All I know is I have won a Cup and I’ll get a ring. Obviously, I left a mark on this team [statistically], but the Cup leaves a mark on the whole city. This city has been so good to me, these people have been amazing. We have the best fans.

“I’m enjoying this just like a kid. This is the best moment of my life. Everyone is exhausted, but everyone is having a good time and partying because we did it. And this is our Cup. We’re never going to play all together again, but I will remember these guys forever.”