



Jags Win Top Prize

Silver Stick Trophy is youth hockey's own Stanley Cup

By Michael Whiteman-Jones
Professional hockey teams vie for the coveted Stanley Cup.

But for Pee Wee and Bantam youth hockey teams all across North America, the Cup's equivalent for the last 47 years has been an unusual-looking trophy—a 50-inch-long sterling silver hockey stick displayed at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. It's hung next to the names of the teams that win the International Silver Stick tournament every year.

Now the Jaguars Bantam AA team from the Hyland Hills Hockey Association in Westminster has added its name to that envied honor roll. The Jaguars claimed the Silver Stick trophy January 11 by winning the championship game 1-0 deep into an overtime period after battling one of Canada's top youth hockey teams through three scoreless regulation periods.

The Jaguars are the first Bantam AA team west of the Mississippi to win the tournament and the only team from Colorado. It is one of just 16 U.S. Bantam AA teams to claim the top prize in an event that attracts more than 65,000 players from America and Canada who compete in qualifying regional tournaments every fall hoping to attend the finals in Port Huron, Mich.

To qualify for the championship game, the Jaguars went 4-0-1, narrowly defeating teams from

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Matt McNichols, center, celebrates the team's Silver Stick victory with team mates Dawson Pascale, left, and Mac Pitts. McNichols scored the go-ahead goal in overtime with an assist from Pascale.

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Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan and Canada. The matches included a 2-2 tie with the Missis-sauga Braves, which is Canada's top-ranked Bantam AA team, and a game against the Port Huron Flags that was played before a hostile hometown crowd of about 1,200 people on the tournament's opening night. Crafty winger George Gruber silenced the crowd late in the third period by snapping the game's winning goal into the net off a crisp assist from his line mate, winger Mac Pitts. Pitts had carried the puck behind the net and patiently protected it until Gruber found an opening near the opposition's goal post.

A Dramatic Win

But it was a dramatic 5-4 quarter-final victory over the Naperville Sabers that emotionally propelled the team into the championship.

With less than 4 minutes left in the fast-paced game, the Jaguars appeared to be down for the count by two goals. But a confounding shot from defenseman Nate Mikesell fluttered into the net at 11:21 in the third period, lifting the score to 4-3. All-purpose forward Gabriel Whiteman-Jones soon tied the game up by scoring from somewhere inside a furious scrum with 10 seconds to spare. Then winger Dawson Pascale elbowed his way past Naperville's defense to get the go-ahead goal at 3:40 in overtime. Pascale's shot stunned

the opposition's bench into shocked silence as the Jaguars erupted in a wild celebration that continued in the locker room long after the game had ended.

"We called a timeout after Naperville scored their fourth goal, and I didn't say much to the boys," Head Coach Jamie O'Leary says. "I just told them that they were more mentally tough than what they were showing right then. You could almost visibly see their body language change. It turned from being dejected to being fired up and having to prove something. Once we got that third goal, there was no doubt we were going to win."

On the final day of play, the Jaguars notched a 3-2 win in an

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The Team, from left, bottom row: Ryan Fay, Nate Mikesell, Sammy Bernard-Boymel. **Middle row:** Lance Pennington, Scott Smoot, Mac Pitts, Jackson Barliant, Evan Kihn. **Top row:** Head Coach Jamie O'Leary, Mitch Coan, Blake Couture, Gabe Whiteman-Jones, Kyle Wellborn, Cody Thompson, Brandon Brewer, George Gruber, Keegan McCarthy, Matt McNichols, Austin Shick, Nate Guyman, Dawson Pascale, Asst. Coach Adam Sater.



Defenseman Keegan McCarthy whoops with joy after his team wins the Silver Stick. He was later named to the tournament's All-Star Team.

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early morning semi-final game against the Capital Centre Pride from Lansing, Mich. Then they prepared to meet the Mississauga Braves, Canada's second-highest ranked Bantam AA team. The Braves looked like an experienced, disciplined, physical team—and they were.

"It was a very emotional game with a lot of hard hitting," says Matt McNichols, who centers the Jaguars' top line and scored the game-winning goal from the right hash marks with an assist from behind the net that was sent his way by Pascale. "We laid a lot on the line in that final game. The teams were evenly matched, and there was a lot of back and forth hockey through the first three periods. We had come so far, and to see our hopes lying on the



Defense was critical to the team's success. Here, defenseman Blake Coutre guards the blue line while his line's forwards attack the Port Huron Flags' net.

line with a single goal, it was pretty intense."

McNichols admits he doesn't remember his goal.

"Dawson got hit and the puck came loose so I dropped in and took a real hard, low shot," he says. "It wasn't like I saw a big hole or anything—I think there was a gap between the goalie's glove and leg pad—and I didn't realize it had gone in until our bench started clearing. It was amazing."

O'Leary describes the game as a test of his team's mental and physical endurance.

"They were really big and they knew how to use their size," he says. "But we answered their play. I thought we took the physical game to them even though they had a clear weight and size advantage. It would have been a game changer if they'd gotten a goal early but our goaltending was strong, so on both sides there were a lot of scrambles. It was a controlled strategic game for 8 minutes, followed by 2 minutes of chaos at both ends of the ice.

"In the end, having four lines made a difference for us, especially from about the 8-minute

mark in the third period. We could tell that Mississauga was wearing down. It was a nasty, tough game, but that is what championship hockey is. At high levels, you don't often see run-away championship games. It's always physical, it's always grinding."

Teamwork Was Critical

Teamwork was critical to the team's success throughout the tournament, O'Leary says.

"I conducted individual meetings with players when we arrived in Port Huron to ask everybody to do their specific jobs in each game. It was gratifying to watch every member of the team play their role throughout the tournament and contribute," he says, pointing out that many players shared in the team's goals and assists. "We really sacrificed ourselves in every area of the ice. We blocked shots, took hits—did all the little things that casual fans might not notice that you need to do to win big games. We rarely saw kids pulling the chute and opting to get to the puck second. They got to the puck first."

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Silver Stick officials recognized the outstanding play of four Jaguars by naming them to the Silver Sticks' All-Star Team. They were goalies Ryan Fay and Sammy Bernard-Boymel, defenseman Keegan McCarthy and left winger Mitch Coan, whose puck handling and creative skating helped make him the tournament's top scorer with five goals and four assists.

O'Leary also praised forward Whiteman-Jones and defenseman Austin Shick.

"Gabe was the most physical player of the tournament, bar none," he says. "He's got a great



shot, and his puck protection skills are excellent. I thought his role was unbelievably important to our success on the ice all weekend long. We rotated him through all four lines as the situation demanded, and he created a lot of time and space for all four lines to work in."

Meanwhile, "if there was an unsung hero this weekend, it was Austin Shick," O'Leary adds. "I don't think Austin made a defensive mistake the entire tournament. Our entire defense was rock solid. We have some very special players on this team."

O'Leary says winning the Silver Stick Tournament "is a huge stepping stone" toward the team's year-end goal of winning the state championship. "Now we have the confidence to go out and win another national championship," he says.

Mostly, though, he believes it was fun.

"I came into the locker room before we beat Port Huron and shouted that this is the most fun I've had on the bench in five years of coaching," he says. "After the game, the boys were all hooting and hollering about how much fun they'd had. They

Head Coach Jamie O'Leary, left, told the team to play with intensity and to never be afraid to be first to the puck or to take—and give—big hits.

thoroughly enjoyed it and had a great time on and off the ice the whole weekend. It was great being in a true hockey town like Port Huron."

The Silver Stick tournament was founded in 1961 to promote citizenship and international goodwill. Named after the 1905 Ottawa Silver Seven Stanley Cup championship team, it was originally played by youth hockey teams from Ontario, Michigan and New York, but quickly spread throughout Canada and the U.S.

Port Huron has been the tournament's permanent home since 1963. Located northeast of Detroit, the quiet town of about 34,000 residents is perhaps best known as the childhood home of inventor Thomas Edison and as a gateway to Lake Huron and Canada.

But the town comes to life every January as thousands of hockey players and fans descend on it for the tournament. Many locals attend games at the Henry McMorran Memorial Sports Arena downtown to cheer hometown teams or watch the nation's best youth hockey teams compete.



Goalies had a hard time stopping the Jaguars' attack, including this shot from winger Evan Kihn.