

Lane helped bring Avs to town and Stanley Cup soon followed

By Mike Chambers

The Denver Post



Gary Lane oversaw the city-owned McNichols Sports Arena when the Quebec Nordiques moved to Denver and became the Colorado Avalanche. Aaron Ontiveroz, *The Denver Post*

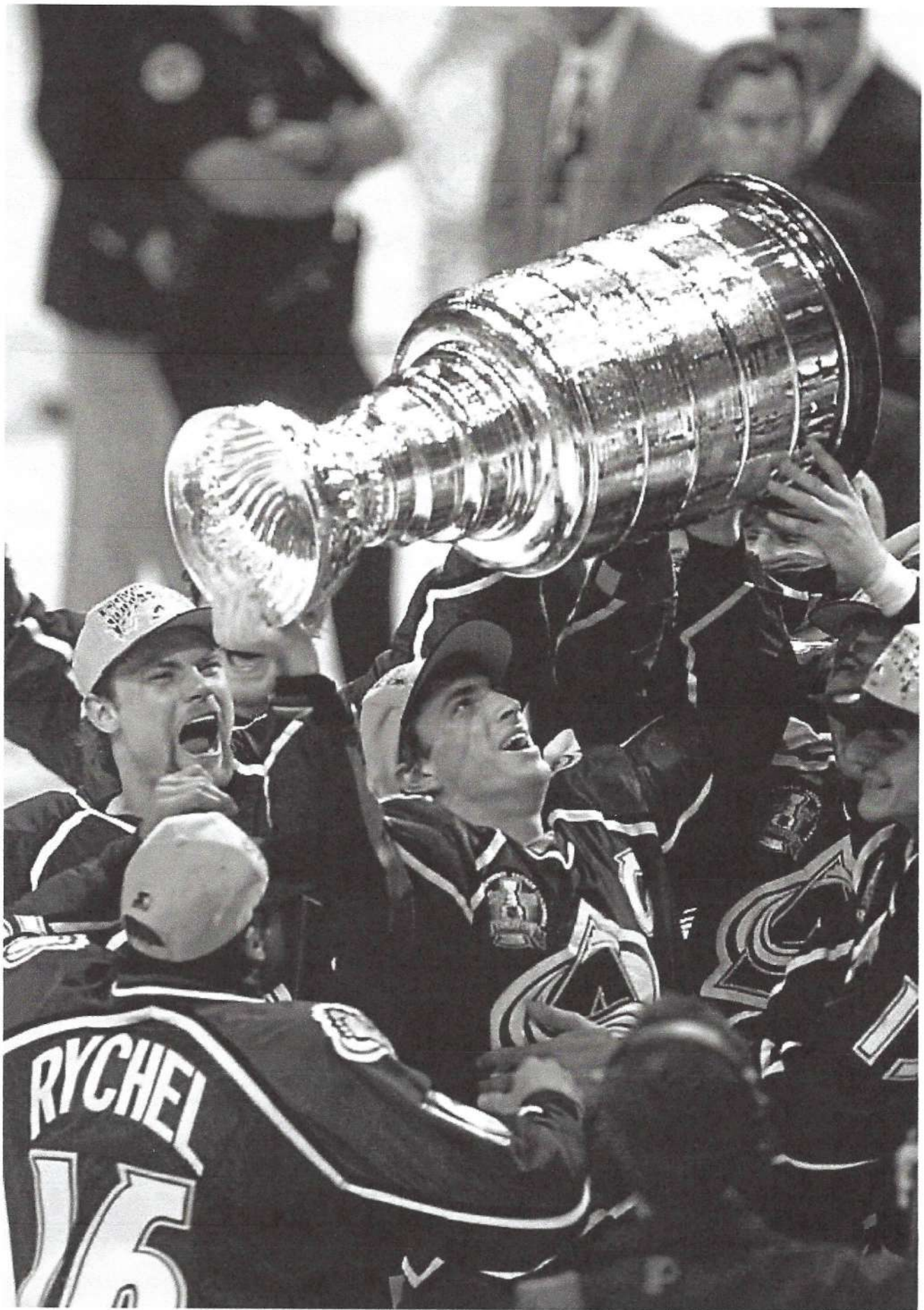
Wearing a Patrick Roy jersey inside the Miami Arena visitors' locker room around 1:30 a.m. on June 11, 1996, Wellington Webb found himself in Joe Sakic's crosshairs.

The Avalanche, in its first year of existence, had just swept the Florida Panthers in the Stanley Cup Final with a 1-0 three-overtime victory in Game 4. And now, minutes after defenseman Uwe Krupp's sudden-death winner clinched the Cup, Sakic, the Avs' captain, was pouring champagne all over Denver's mayor.

Any doubts Wellington may have once had about professional hockey making it in Denver had long since vanished. On this night, Webb became a true burgundy-and-blue Avalanche fan, like thousands of other Coloradans have become in the 25 years since the Avs became the Avs.

"We ran down on the ice, which in hindsight, I thought, 'This is kind of silly, who is this black guy running around down here?'" Webb said in a phone interview.

"... I flew back on the Avalanche flight. I thought that was the most special moment that was



Gary Lane was in Miami Arena as Avalanche captain Joe Sakic lifted the Stanley Cup. Denver Post file



Among Gary Lane's mementoes is a photo of Lane with Adam Foote and Joe Sakic. The trio is looking at photos from the Avs' visit with President Bill Clinton. Aaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post

worth being elected mayor to do this. I have a little disappointment for those mayors who never had a chance to fly with their team after that (major-league) championship.”

Gary Lane was also in Miami Arena that night, reveling in the Stanley Cup victory.

Just two years earlier the City of Denver executive had helped sell Webb on the idea of bringing professional hockey back to Denver. And while Lane didn't get the chance to share in the euphoria of that jubilant flight home, it's quite possible Colorado's first major sports championship wouldn't have happened without him.

Doubting mayor

Lane, now 67 and semi-retired from his company, CenterLane Attractions, was the City of Denver's director of arenas and theaters under Mayor Webb when a chance to bring the International Hockey League to Denver came across his desk in 1994.

At the time, Lane oversaw every aspect of city-owned McNichols Sports Arena, Red Rocks Amphitheatre, Denver Coliseum and multiple other venues throughout Denver. But he and Webb didn't see eye-to-eye about professional hockey in Denver.

A Pittsburgh native who worked for the Penguins and the NHL's Colorado Rockies (1976-82), Lane was a hockey guy who believed a successful stint with an IHL franchise could lead to another shot at getting an NHL team. He helped bring several NHL preseason games to McNichols, including Wayne Gretzky and the Los Angeles Kings against the Quebec Nordiques on Sept. 20, 1989, and Mario Lemieux and the reigning Cup-champion Pittsburgh Penguins against the Calgary Flames on Sept. 19, 1991.

As he was working on the 1994 deal with what was to become the expansion Denver Grizzlies of the IHL, Lane said Webb told him, "Hockey will never be successful here."

Denver already had the Broncos and the Nuggets, and baseball's Colorado Rockies were in their second year as an MLB expansion team and drawing record crowds. With three pro franchises in town, as well as a successful brand of hockey down the road at the University of Denver, Webb wasn't convinced the city would support more hockey.

"(Webb) looked at it as splitting the existing sports pie market. I told him we would make a bigger pie out of it," Lane said. "I said the Grizzlies will help us get the NHL back here. And he said, 'No way, it's just not going to be successful.'"

Webb said he doesn't remember today exactly how he felt about hockey in 1994.

"If I had doubts it was probably because we had so much on our plate. It is without question that Denver International Airport was sucking up all the oxygen in the room," he said.

Tim Leiweke, the Nuggets' president at the time, was also in favor of adding a hockey team to McNichols because "he also understood that having two tenants would help him get a new arena," Lane said.

McNichols was built in 1975 but considered outdated at the time. What became the Pepsi Center was in the works.

So, betting on an untapped hockey market and gaining traction with Leiweke, Lane brokered a deal with Grizzlies owner Dave Elmore. A year later, the Grizzlies had to leave town.

Excellent from the outset

The 1994-95 hockey season in Denver was a great one.

The Grizzlies played to near-sellout crowds at McNichols, which held 16,061 for hockey, en route to winning the IHL championship. Then came the Quebec Nordiques, who were playing in the NHL's smallest market, coming off a lockout-shortened 30-13-5 season and surprising first-round exit from the Stanley Cup playoffs. They were looking to relocate to the U.S., and Nuggets ownership group COMSAT (Communications Satellite Corp.) was interested in acquiring another major league tenant as it eyed a new arena deal.

Lane worked that deal with Tony Tavares, a veteran national sports executive who helped facilitate negotiations between the Nordiques, COMSAT executive Charlie Lyons and the NHL.

"The Grizzlies, that worked, but what really worked for me was meeting with Charlie Lyons," Webb said. "You know how sometimes people have chemistry and then others don't? The chemistry with Charlie Lyons was good."

That chemistry, among many other things, helped push the sale along. And the Nordiques were ultimately sold to COMSAT for \$75 million and renamed the Colorado Avalanche.

"You know how the NHL works. They like to make their own decisions. I voiced my support in the deal and so on and so forth, but I wasn't the main guy — I just tried to help," Tavares said. "Gary was a friend and I thought Colorado was a great spot for an NHL team. I can't honestly take credit for anything that happened. There were people like Gary (Lane) who fought tooth and nail to get the thing."

But Tavares had business and personal relationships with Nordiques president/CEO Marcel Aubut and general manager Pierre Lacroix, the latter of whom relocated with that same title to Denver.

"He and I were buddies," Tavares said of Lacroix. "I knew Aubut and Pierre very well. So, I knew the players, is the best way to put it, and I tried to provide good guidance."

All of this was possible because Lane made a save of Patrick Roy proportions a year earlier when he was negotiating a five-year lease to bring the Grizzlies to Denver. Lane, having known minor-league hockey's checkered past at Denver Coliseum, insisted the Grizzlies play at McNichols — the former home of the NHL's Rockies — and share the building with the Nuggets.

But the real stroke of genius came with an "out clause" Lane insisted be part of the contract — language that allowed the city to terminate the Grizzlies' deal without cause if the city had an opportunity to bring the NHL back to town.

In hindsight, that paved the way for the Nordiques, who were also considering a move to Arizona at the time, to relocate to Denver and become the Avalanche.

“If it weren’t for a paragraph in the Grizzlies contract,” Lane said, “we probably wouldn’t be here.”

End of the Lane

Lane’s 10 years with the City of Denver ended in 1996 when he opposed tearing down McNichols as Pepsi Center was set to open across Interstate 25 in 1997.

“At that time, no city was tearing down a perfectly good public assembly venue just because they were building another one. They still need them, so I disagreed,” Lane said. “McNichols had no debt. All it needed was a new roof. We wanted to make McNichols a concert hall.

“It was part of the Broncos’ footprint. Both (McNichols and the Broncos’ new stadium) would have co-existed quite well. But as the saying goes, you can’t make an omelette unless you break a few eggs.”

Still, Lane has fond memories of his tenure with the city — particularly Game 4 in Miami. He flew there with a friend in the security business, Thompson Smith, who would ultimately build Argus into the security giant that now has contracts for the Pepsi Center, Empower Field at Mile High, Red Rocks, Magness Arena and others.

In a two-year span, Denver went from no professional hockey to a Stanley Cup-celebrating city.

Lane has never before publicly talked about his role in bringing the Nordiques to Colorado. But 25 years later, he’s still proud of the determination he had in giving Denver a second chance at the NHL.

“It doesn’t get much better,” Lane said of celebrating with the Stanley Cup in 1996. “I really don’t want to live in the past, but that past is pretty hard to beat. We plotted for this long-term plan, but it happened a lot faster than we, or anybody, thought was possible.

“You could say that group of mine were unsung front-office folks.”