

## **For Hockey Champs, Stanley Cup's Visit Is Icing on the Cake --- Escort's Goal on One Road Trip Is to Keep NHL Trophy Out of Swimming Pool**

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WINNIPEG, Manitoba -- Cold beer flows and rock music blares while, in a corner of the backyard, partygoers have their pictures taken with tonight's guest of honor: the Stanley Cup.

A few are plotting a bit of mischief: Will the National Hockey League's championship trophy get tossed into the pool?

Not if Scott North can help it. The slight 30-year-old fidgets at poolside while giddy revelers gulp beer from the cup's sterling silver bowl. Two have underwater cameras at the ready. "The cup does not go into the pool," Mr. North keeps repeating. "Please."

Like the brawlers who protect star scorers from rough stuff in the NHL, Mr. North has to keep bad things from happening to the Stanley Cup, symbol of hockey supremacy for 103 years. He and two of his co-workers at the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto take turns escorting the trophy on a postseason tour unlike anything in sports. Each member of the championship team gets the cup, wherever he likes, for a day or two. With it comes Mr. North or one of his colleagues, pro hockey's cupsitters.

Escorts have long accompanied the cup on publicity trips, but it was generally unsupervised on player visits until midsummer 1994. That year, members of the New York Rangers took it bar hopping, used it as a horse's feedbag, let it drop out of a car trunk and banged it up badly enough to require cosmetic surgery.

Two years earlier, the cup got stuck on a drain in the backyard pool of Pittsburgh Penguin Mario Lemieux. Last summer, a New Jersey Devil ran his boat aground in Lake Superior while ferrying the cup home after a night at the bar. It has also been lost, stolen, booted into a canal, and used as a flower pot and a peanut dish.

Lord Stanley, the sixth governor general of Canada, didn't have such hi-jinks in mind when he established the cup in 1893. But NHL officials say the summer odyssey gives players a rare chance to share their achievement with the people closest to them. "It's what you grow up dreaming about," says Mike Keane, the Colorado Avalanche player hosting the cup in Winnipeg. At 35 pounds and just under 3 feet tall, the cup bears the engraved names of close to 1,000 players, coaches and owners whose teams have won the NHL title. Its look changed frequently in the early part of the century, evolving to its current barrel shape in 1959. Originally purchased for about \$50, the cup today is insured for \$100,000.

This summer the cup has traveled from Vaudreuil, Quebec, where goalie Patrick Roy used it to raise money at a charity golf tournament, to Warren, Mich., where defenseman Craig Wolanin lugged it to his cousin's high-school graduation party. Chris Simon took it fishing with his grandfather in northern Ontario. Stephane Yelle posed for photos and signed autographs at his elementary school in tiny Bourget, Ontario. The cup made its first overseas-player visit, to star-scorer Peter Forsberg's boyhood home in Ornskoldsvik, Sweden.

All along, a cupsitter has strived to keep the precious chalice safe and in sight. On duty for the mid-August trip to Winnipeg is Mr. North, officially the Hall of Fame's manager of special events and facility sales. He has ushered the cup to many NHL events and donned white gloves to carry it onto the ice when the Avalanche completed its sweep of the Florida Panthers in June.

Today's journey begins in Denver. The cup spent the night with Mr. North at a Ramada Inn, secure in its blue, foam-padded chest. He removes it for a quick polishing before heading to the airport, where ticket agents have been alerted. Mr. North obliges one who pleads for a photo, unlocking the chest while waiting travelers crane their necks for a look. "Isn't it amazing?" one

says.

"They just eat it up," Mr. North says.

He plays down the security part of his job, calling himself an "ambassador" and "facilitator."

"The players have too much respect to mess with the cup," he says. Never mind that Mr. Keane, a scrappy, 29-year-old winger with shaggy red hair and a goatee, was a member of the 1993 Montreal Canadiens team that dunked the trophy in a player's pool. Mr. North expects nothing but "a lot of fun."

He gets an inkling that Mr. Keane might have a different idea of "fun" shortly after the player collects him and the cup at the airport. Mr. North is outlining a few rules -- for example, only players and their immediate families should hoist or drink from the cup -- when Mr. Keane hints that it could take a swim.

No way, Mr. North insists. Water and chlorine could corrode the silver and cause who-knows-what other damage, he says, adding, "My butt is on the line." Mr. Keane dubs him "the bloodhound."

Mr. North sighs. "This is going to be an interesting night," he says.

First stop is Mr. Keane's modest home. His wife, Tammy; their dog, Molson; and a dozen or so family members eat Kentucky Fried Chicken and pose for photos in Avalanche T-shirts and caps. They laugh when Mr. Keane's brother sits his infant son in the cup. Mr. Keane's 97-year-old grandmother arrives. "Hey, Sparky," he calls out affectionately, "there's somebody here who's even older than you."

The family reassembles that evening in the backyard of friends Paul and Cathy Cholakis, who have known Mr. Keane since he played youth hockey with one of their three sons. The cup is set on a table beneath a white canopy. Mr. North asks for a sturdier table, lest the cup take a spill. Waiters in striped referee shirts serve more than 90 guests amid Stanley Cup-shaped ice sculptures and a cake resembling the Avalanche logo. A banner stretched behind the in-ground pool reads, "Way to go, Mike!" with a caricature of Mr. Keane smoking an enormous victory cigar. Winnipeegers are especially appreciative; they just lost their pro team, the Jets, to Phoenix. Flashbulbs pop as guests clamor for pictures with the cup. They peer and point at the trophy's engravings, searching for names of favorite players and distant relatives. The ban on hoisting is roundly ignored; one guest dons a hockey jersey and gloves and cavorts with the trophy aloft for the cameras.

Soon lime wedges are floating in the beer slopping over the cup's brim. A dozen whooping young men quaff from the cup, two at a time. Two police officers who show up to quiet the party wind up posing with the cup. "We don't care about the noise," one says. "Have a good time."

Mr. North dares not move from his spot near the pool. A number of guests have informed him that, rule or no, the cup is going for a dip. Finally, he warns Mr. Keane that if the trophy goes into the pool, it won't be available for a charity golf outing the next day. Nor will it make a party hosted later in the week by one of Mr. Keane's teammates.

"Sometimes you've got to say whatever it takes to make them not do whatever you don't want them to do," Mr. North explains. He brushes off the supposedly prohibited drinking and hoisting.

"I'm just worried about the pool," he says.

Mr. Keane, who is known in the NHL as a team leader and was the Canadiens' captain last year, tells his pals to leave the cup alone. Mr. North relaxes enough to enjoy a beer. But he still isn't out of trouble. One guest tries to take Mr. North into the pool. He sidesteps the lunge and the attacker winds up drenched.

Mr. North packs up the cup, undamaged and undunked, around 1 a.m. -- not a moment too soon.

Mr. Keane begins roaming the yard for dry people to toss in the drink. A number of wrestling matches break out, including one that leaves the Cholakis's fence minus a few slats.

Still, Mr. Keane's buddies insist they never meant to harm hockey's Holy Grail. "Hey, we don't want to wreck the Stanley Cup," says Dean Court, a radio ad salesman who skates with Mr. Keane in a local summer league. "The boys are rambunctious, but they're not stupid."