

We remember the glory and gory days of playoff hockey

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Commentary

It's the end of spring, that time of year when a young man or woman's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of playoff hockey. For the poor, beleaguered Oilers (and Montreal Canadiens) fans here at the Gateway, however, indulging those thoughts isn't as easy as simply turning on the CBC. We have to think back to playoff games of yore, when men were men and Edmontonians were cheering for Chris Pronger for a reason other than wanting the Oilers to get an extra draft pick. With that in mind, here are our picks for most memorable playoff hockey moments.

Trevor Phillips

There have been many epic battles in the history of the world—David vs Goliath, Achilles vs Hector, and Bob Barker vs Happy Gilmore to name a few—but these pale in comparison to John Vanbiesbrouck vs Patrick Roy, on 10 June, 1996. The Beezer against St Patrick was simply the greatest display of goaltending ever, regardless of the context. During game four of the '96 Stanley Cup Final, the duo battled shot for shot for three overtime periods before Uwe Krupp destroyed my childhood on the 119th shot of the night, a blast from the right point, to give the Avs a 1-0 victory.

You see, back in 1996, there wasn't much to cheer for in Edmonton. The Oilers hadn't made the playoffs since 1993, and expansion had given fans everywhere a chance to cheer for new teams. The Florida Panthers were the team that I picked.

In 1996, the Year of the Rat, led by a mixed bag of character guys—Mellanby, Skrudland, Barnes, and Jovonovski—the Panthers battled their way to the Final, only to be swept by the budding powerhouse from Mile High. Still, that playoff run captured this young fan's dream to follow a team through a thrilling two-month post-season ride, and wouldn't be equaled for me until ten years later.

That series also gave us the best snapshot in playoff history. That year, after the Panthers scored in the old Miami arena, fans would flood the ice with rubber rats. While most goalies would take refuge in the net, Roy stood and took the pelting of faux-rodents for the entire delay, and took it with pride—a great moment in pro sports.

Adam Gaumont

My most beloved and most painful playoff memory came, on Monday, 21 April, 1997. It was the Oilers' first series against the Dallas Stars—the one they went on to win, of course, in game seven. But I'm not here to talk about Todd Marchant's overtime heroics—I'm here to talk about Kelly Buchberger's overtime heroics.

I was not quite 14. It was my first (and probably last) stint as a babysitter. I was somehow cold-hearted enough to have sent my young charges to bed after the third period (though, in my defense, I left the radio on for them), so it was just me alone in the

basement. Of a split-level. With a seven-foot ceiling.

The Oilers had just completed the most improbable of comebacks, tying it in the last four minutes of the game despite having been down 3-0. Weight, Kovalenko, and Grier had all scored—now it was Bucky's turn.

It's nine minutes into overtime: Mats Lindren swoops into the Stars' zone. He gets rocked head over heels by the Dallas defender, but not before making a sweet little drop pass to the trailing Buchberger. Bucky wheels in from the right side and whips a wrist-past the glove of Andy Moog.

Still pumped from the frenzied third-period comeback, I leapt off the couch, arms pumped high in true hooligan style. Well, not that high—remember the seven-foot ceiling? It abruptly halted the rapid ascension of my clenched fists. I doubled over, my hands bloodied but intact, relishing the sweet taste of victory and picking bits of stucco out of my skin.

Hey, if I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times: being an Oilers fan ain't easy.

Steve Smith

I have many fond playoff memories: watching game seven in 1987, aware of little more than that the winner of this game won the Stanley Cup; having my junior high-school principal burst into our dorm room to tell us that Kelly Buchberger had just capped one of the greatest comebacks in playoff history in game three against the 1997 Stars, mere moments after telling us to shut up and go to sleep; reading about last year's game six victory against the Hurricanes from my girlfriend's sister's internet connection in Nuremberg; and having my entire high-school assembly burst into a spontaneous chant of "Bell-foouurr" for no apparent reason. Consequently, the task of designating my favourite playoff memory ought to be a hard one.

But any Oilers fan of my generation who identifies any moment other than the 1997 Marchant goal as his/her favourite is lying. That year, remember, marked the end of the Oilers' five-year playoff drought—one that had lasted a third of my life. Expectations had been lowered, and the Oilers putting up bargain-basement lineups consisting of guys named Ilya Byakin and Bob Beers had become normal and expected.

Then they returned to the playoffs, faced arguably the best team in hockey, and, through a series of miracles, found themselves in overtime in game seven.

The puck somehow made its way to Todd Marchant, who skated right around Grant Ledyard for what I would conservatively estimate as the eight billionth breakaway of his career. This one, unlike all of the others, resulted in a goal. Listening to Rod Phillips call it, I could hear Glen Sather whooping in the background—the only time I'd ever heard him excited.

There have been other upsets since then, of course, but this one just seemed more impossible. That year, I was convinced the Oilers were going to get swept; not long after I was taking guys named Scott Fraser in my playoff pools. That win brought back all of our expectations.

With the Ducks in the finals this year, I'll be cheering for them. As an Oilers fan, I figure that Pronger

vs Comrie's a wash. But Marchant vs McAmmond? No contest.

Robin Collum

My most vivid playoff memory is a sad one. Two years ago, the U of A hosted CIS men's hockey Nationals, and both the Bears and the University of Saskatchewan Huskies made it to the final.

Now, usually I'm as big a Pandas and Bears fan as the next person on this campus (or more so, seeing how I actually go to their games), but not that year. You see, one of my cousins was the Huskies starting goalie, so I was sitting with a large contingent of my extended family in the tiny Saskatchewan section of the stands (which consisted of us, some frat boys dressed in all green, and another player's family, including a small child in really cute green socks and a wee Huskies sweatshirt).

It had been an excellent, fast-paced game, and near the end of the third, the Huskies were leading 3-2. My cousin had made some great saves, and as the final minutes ticked away, our section of the stands was ready to celebrate.

That's when everything went terribly wrong for us: with a minute left to go, Alberta pulled their goalie and mounted a last-ditch attack. Somehow—perhaps through black magic—Ben Thomson got his stick on the puck and sent a wicked slapshot just over my cousin's shoulder. With twenty-three seconds left, Alberta had tied the game. Our small section of the stands was suddenly very quiet, but the rest of Rexall made up for our silence by going absolutely nuts.

Five minutes into overtime, Thomson was the villain again, as he grabbed a rebound off one of my cousin's saves and put in the winner for Alberta.

It was a great game, and from an unbiased (or a U of A) perspective, Thompson scored two really good goals, but for me and the small pocket of green around me, it totally sucked.

Paul Owen

When it comes to NHL playoff moments, there's one that sticks out in my mind the most; in fact, I remember it as if it were last year. That was when Andrew Ladd went all Tonya Harding on Dwayne Roloson in the first game of the Stanley Cup Finals, leaving Rollie the Goalie squirming on the ground in pain—and Oilers fans' hopes in the toilet.

Perhaps the rest of the game, like Ty Conklin's behind-the-net excursion to hockey hell, would stand out in my mind as well, but I blacked out with rage and despair after Osama Bin Ladd-en left the Oilers with the same goaltending situation that had made them to miss the playoffs in 2003/04, and stumble into the post-season last year. It's not that I had no confidence in the Conkannen combo—I was completely confident that they were going to blow it for the Oilers. It's not my fault that's exactly what happened.

Being a Winnipeg Jets fan in the early '90s was hardly conducive to long playoff runs, so my first experience of with one was with the 2005/06 Edmonton Oilers. It's just a shame that such a great stretch of playoff hockey was derailed by a runaway former Hitman.

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