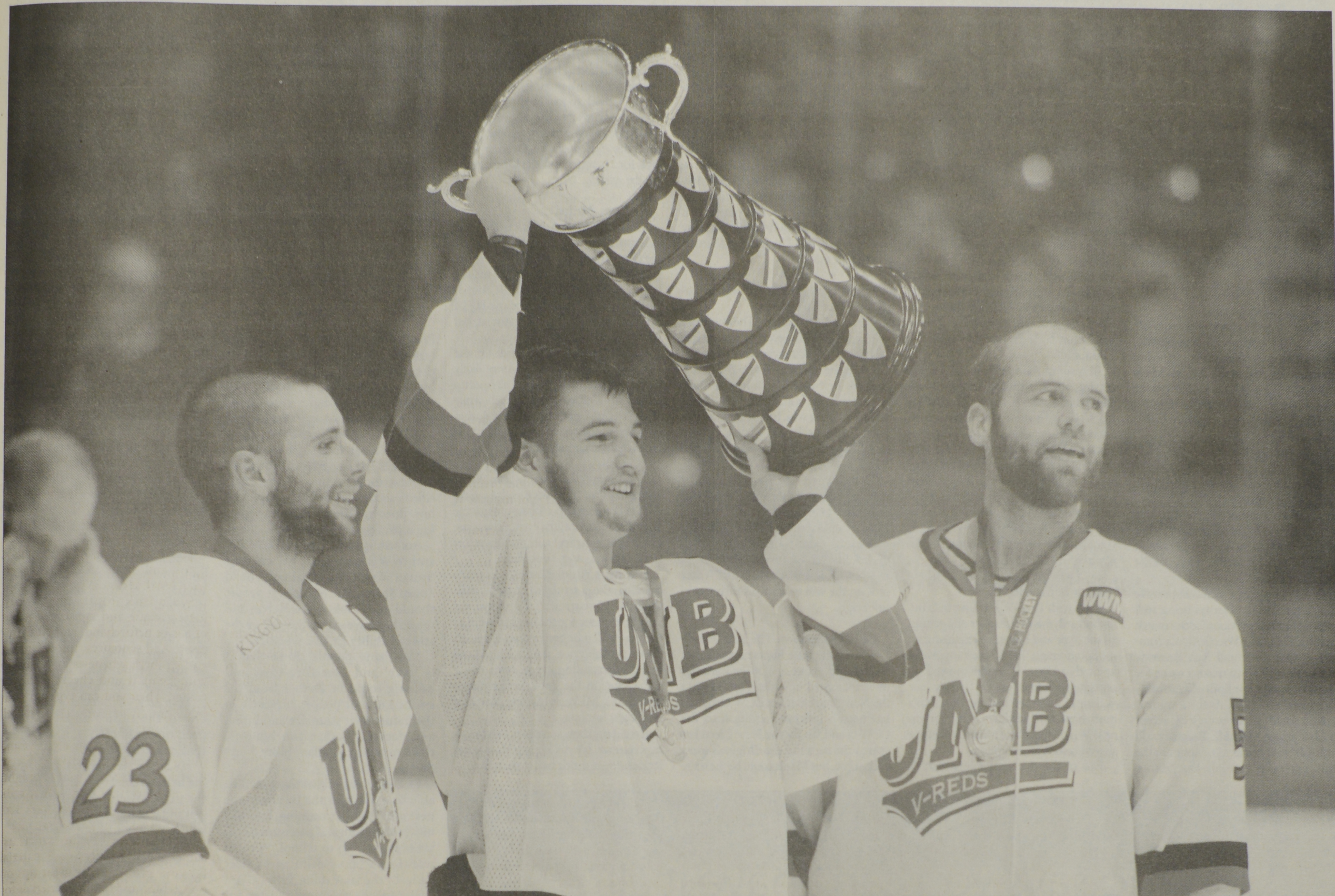


Varsity Reds: A long road to the cup



Sheah Gaston / The Brunswickan

by Sheah Gaston

In front of 6,023 fans, UNB's Varsity Reds played a déjà-vu match against the Université de Moncton's Aigles Bleus, and hoisted the CIS University cup for the first time since the 1999 tournament. The match was a long-awaited chance at revenge for the V-Reds after five regular season defeats and a brutal double overtime loss to the Aigles in the final game of the AUS Championships.

With two weeks' rest and the motivation vengeance brings, the Reds entered the first CIS game Thursday at 2 pm. The U of S Huskies posed the first challenge. And with most players sitting on or near the 200-pound mark and a battering defensive trinity -- 220-pound Scott Roy, 208-pound Brett Dickie, and 210-pound Evan Schafer, all above 6'2" -- Saskatchewan posed a very real threat indeed. Not to mention they'd already unseated the Western Division champions and last year's CIS winners, the University of Alberta Golden Bears.

From the start, the Huskies hammered UNB, who seemed shell-shocked for the first few hits, but quickly rallied to match Saskatchewan's physicality. Within 10 minutes, the Huskies had pulled out a first goal by knocking the Reds off the puck to reverse the play. Colin Patterson snapped it high over Mike Ouzas' shoulder, carrying through on a pass from fellow forward Jason Wagar.

The game leaned in the Huskies' favour as Nathan O'Nabigon skated to the box for interference. UNB, however, have a strong penalty kill -- strong enough for veteran forward Denny Johnston to grab a pass from Josh Hepditch, skate to the net and backhand a shot on the mesh behind Huskies goalie Jeff Harvey.

The second period saw a very different dynamic than the first. UNB dominated play. The physical play that had blown the V-Reds off the

puck in the first period ended up costing Saskatchewan when Matt Girling earned two minutes for kneeling. The ice was now wide open for UNB's Dustin Friesen and Darryl Boyce to collaborate on the game winning goal.

Though aware of the Reds' strong powerplay, Boyce feels his decisive goal came with a little luck as well. "On the powerplay I don't think there's any given set play that we have. We move around and we try to find whoever's open. [Hepditch] got a stick on it and it just came rolling to me. I just one timed it and eventually it went in."

With a game behind him and another game on the horizon, Varsity Reds coach Gardiner MacDougall was thrilled but already thinking of the future. "It's all about preparation," he said. "We're just a little bit hungrier than the last time we played and we have to be just a little bit more hungry in our next game."

Game two of the series opened with an unexpected flourish; having taken a lesson from the Huskies, UNB opened with a bang, crushing every player in their way. Friesen took first blood, nailing Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières player Thierry Poudrier. The crowd, of course, loved the contact and screamed for more, and the Reds did not disappoint. Play between the two teams had been physical in previous years, but even the Patriotes registered obvious surprise at this unfamiliar physical team. The most memorable UNB-UQTR match up had been in the 2003 finals; UQTR yanked the rug from under the Reds' feet.

This game, however, ended 5-0, a shutout for UNB goalie Mike Ouzas and a strong lesson to UQTR, who had lost much of their veteran talent the year before. Patriotes head coach Jacques Laporte was disappointed at the loss, but knew his young team would take away a good lesson. For him, the brutal defeat was the seed of a thrilling victory in future.

"I hope they've learned from the leadership this year," he said, indicating his retiring goalie, Danny Dallaire. "It was a great experience for my guys, and I hope that this

leader and this game will leave a message. We will have [UNB] next year and they can use this experience next year."

UNB forward Nathan O'Nabigon made a name for himself in the game, emerging from his regular season shell to become a dominant personality in game two, with a top corner goal in the second period. He feels he has finally settled in.

"I had a rough year, but during the playoffs I started playing with Boyce and Dickson, and since then we rolled into the playoffs pretty good. I'm just glad I could make good on a goal today. I took an extra second to let the goalie go down so I could go over him."

The Moncton Coliseum was sold out when the puck dropped for the final. Currents of red-clad UNB fans swirled past eddies of blue Moncton supporters. Flags waved all over the stadium. And chants of "UNB! UNB!" were answered with calls of "Let's go les Aigles!"

As they had in previous matches, U de M took the first goal just under three minutes in, a low shot from forward Remi Doucet that popped behind Ouzas and sent Moncton fans into a frenzy of flag waving. And for most of the first period, UNB seemed to be just keeping up with the team who had led them on all season. Antagonism abounded, culminating in the ejection of U de M star player Yvan Busque after a chaotic and enigmatic altercation that had started with Hepditch flying headfirst into the Moncton bench from a mis-aimed hit.

Then in the second, O'Nabigon once again proved his mettle with an emotional tying goal off a pass from Boyce, instigating a group hug around the U de M net. Completely unexpected, the goal did not push UNB to new heights. Though they were obviously working hard, they were plagued by a series of mistakes that eventually led to a goal for the Aigles at 10:32. Moncton's Karl Fournier picked up Reds defeseman Dustin Friesen's dropped puck, and Pierre-Luc LaPrise took it to the net for the goal.

Moncton now seemed firmly in

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