



CHAPTER 1

THE LONGEST JOURNEY IN HOCKEY

“There are three kinds of hockey players. There’s the kind who make things happen, the kind who watch things happen, and the kind who ask, ‘what the hell just happened?’ Be the first kind.”

—McVie’s outgoing voicemail message

As the final seconds ticked down on Game 7 of the 2011 Stanley Cup Final, Tom McVie sat in stunned silence. From his seat in the press box at Rogers Arena in Vancouver, the long-time Boston Bruins’ scout was finally reaching the pinnacle of the sport that had been his life for more than a half-century.

There was no suspense as the Bruins jumped up and down on their bench, waiting anxiously to leap over the boards to mob goalie Tim Thomas for the franchise’s first Stanley Cup victory since Bobby Orr led them to the promised land in 1972.

The outcome had not been in doubt for about an hour, as the Bruins went into the third period of the do-or-die game with a 3-0 lead and added an empty net marker with less than three minutes to play.

As the Bruins spilled on the ice, gloves and sticks airborne, McVie and fellow Bruins' scout Adam Creighton were numb. Then they finally looked at each other and realized they needed to sprint to the stairwell and get down to where all the action was.

As they arrived at the bedlam at ice level a couple of minutes later, Creighton quickly realized that he had been ditched by McVie, who had celebrated his 76th birthday a couple of weeks earlier.

"Somehow, he got on the ice. He was in all the pictures. He's front and centre in almost all of them. He deserved it. I was so happy for him, to be able to celebrate with the players after being in hockey for as long as he was and for all the adversity he had been through," he said.

Scott Bradley, the Bruins' head scout — but who never referred to himself as McVie's boss — was in the middle of the bedlam when Bruins head coach Claude Julien, with the Stanley Cup firmly over his head, locked eyes with him and passed it over. Bradley thrust it into the air.

"It's heavier than you think. The joy was just off the charts," he said.

While the team captain usually has a plan for who he's going to pass it to after receiving it from NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman, the scouts were flying by the seats of their pants. McVie was standing right beside Bradley, making his decision very easy.

"When I handed him the Cup on the ice, I thought he was going to break down. He was so happy and joyful," Bradley said. "He was standing beside me and that was caught on TV — me lifting the Cup and then Tommy lifting the Cup. CBC stuck with it. Here's the guy who is a legend and I'm handing him the Cup. It was euphoria. It was kind of surreal. He'd never won it before after so many years in the business. He'd won in Winnipeg [the WHA's AVCO Cup in 1979] but this was the crown topper for him. It's got his name on it. I know what it meant to him after everything that he had ever done in hockey. He was emotional. Tommy was hard, but he was soft, too."

McVie, who made his debut in professional hockey with the Toledo Mercurys of the International Hockey League in the fall of 1956, was

only too happy to be the “party crasher” that night. Despite a 55-year career in hockey, McVie thought he might never get a chance to be a Stanley Cup champion. As a player, he never made it to the NHL; as an NHL coach, he never made it to the playoffs; but now, as an ambassador for the Boston Bruins, he wasn’t going to let his chance to hold the Cup pass him by. And his hockey family loved having him join the celebration.

Claude Julien loved having McVie join in the celebration. “As much as he got emotional about it, I’m going to be honest, so did I. For all the years he had been in the game, to be able to grab that Stanley Cup at that stage of his hockey career, it meant a lot to me as well. It was pretty special.”

Harry Sinden, another hockey lifer who brought McVie into the Bruins’ family as player/coach of the Dayton Gems in 1973, was happy to see him rewarded with hockey’s ultimate prize. “He’s been really loyal and a terrific guy to be associated with. For him to be a member of our Stanley Cup-winning team was well deserved.”

It could be the longest hockey journey in history. After riding the iron lung in the minors as a player for 18 years; 25 years as a coach, including stints with three expansion franchises, the Washington Capitals, the Winnipeg Jets and the New Jersey Devils; and another 16 years as a scout with the Boston Bruins, McVie had finally reached the goal of millions of kids around the world.

“After 55 fucking years, I got to lift the Stanley Cup. I’ve got a miniature Stanley Cup with my name on it, and I’ve got my AVCO cup right alongside it in my hockey room in my house. I’m good,” McVie said.

But to get to be good, McVie had to endure a lot of bad. An unprecedented, unbelievable amount of really, really bad.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you ever hear interviews I did with Tom McVie, it's always the same pattern — me asking a question, him answering, and me laughing for 30 seconds. Sometimes it was because he was self-deprecating, sometimes it was because the story he was telling was so, so utterly absurd, sometimes it was his one-liners, but the one constant was that he was funny. God, he was funny. And his laugh after he made you laugh made you laugh even harder. It was a hilariously vicious circle.

He'd have me cracking up during regular conversations, too. He called me back after I left him a message, but I didn't recognize the number from which he was calling. "This is just the phone the Bruins gave me in case they want to fire me. I don't answer it," he told me.

I spoke with Tommy extensively for my first book, *The Hot Line*, because he was the last coach of the WHA Jets, and for my second book, *Broken Ribs & Popcorn*, because he was the first coach of the NHL Jets I.O. No interview with Tommy was short because after he'd tell one story, something in his brain would jump to another tale that seemingly had nothing to do with the first one, but there was always a connection. Sometimes, I'd hear six stories about six different incidents from one question.

I said to him on more than one occasion, "Tommy, you need to write a book so people can hear all of your crazy stories!"

He'd dismiss me with something like, "Ah, nobody wants to read the stories of an old coach." I would disagree but before I could press him, he'd be on to another story.

He wrote the foreword for *Broken Ribs* and maybe he liked seeing his name on the cover because he finally agreed to let me write his story in the fall of 2023.

Our plan was for him to come to Winnipeg, the site of his greatest victory as a coach where he led the WHA Jets to the last AVCO Cup championship in the spring of 1979. We were going to go to a Jets game, he'd be shown on the Jumbotron, and I was going to turn my recorder on and tape everything he had to say that weekend.

There were no direct flights from Portland, Oregon, where Tommy lived, to Winnipeg, so he would have had to connect in Vancouver or Minneapolis. Unfortunately, a couple of people close to him discouraged him from the trip because they didn't think he should be traveling alone at age 88. Rather than letting it slide, I should have flown to Portland. We could have gone to a Winterhawks game, and I could have taped a ton of his stories there. Instead, we decided to start on the phone and did a couple of (relatively) quick interviews.

Sometimes we didn't talk about hockey, we talked about life. He was sad about being newly single in his mid-80s, which wasn't his choice. He'd call me up every once in a while to chat about it and I'd do my best to cheer him up. I was a good audience because I listened, but I also laughed a lot when he decided it was time to lighten the mood.

After we'd hang up, I'd call up three of his players from that championship Jets team — Kim Clackson (who is on the cover of this book), Rich Preston and Terry Ruskowski — and ask them to give Tommy a call. They'd been in the trenches with him, and I figured they could tell some stories from the old days that would make him feel better much more than I could. Of course, they called him and did just that.

But then Tommy got sick. He died a few months later, on January

25, 2025, and I thought that was the end of the project. His son Denver told me the news and I shared it with the 1978-'79 Jets. I had organized a 40-year reunion of that team in June 2019, so I had spent some time with most of them. Preston and Clackson told me they were going to Tommy's celebration of life that June in Portland and I joined them. The three of us hung out on the Friday night and told some Tommy stories and I started to think about the book again. Then we went to the event the next day and player after player went up to the microphone and told the wildest tales about Tommy. They were all funny, of course, but they also talked about tough love, the penalties for being late for, well, anything, and how Tommy had changed their lives in a multitude of ways. They loved him.

As soon as the formal part of the celebration was over, I sought out Pat Conacher, Steve Tsujiura, Tim Lenardon, Craig Billington, and a few others and turned my recorder on. I told them this book idea had been on the back burner, but after what I had just heard, I had a new goal — finish the book as a tribute to my friend.

I didn't get a chance to interview Archie Henderson that afternoon, but as he was about to head back to his hotel, I jumped in and introduced myself and told him what I was doing. He immediately gave me his number. I called him when I got home and we chatted for two hours about Tommy. Then he started throwing names and numbers at me of people I should call. Guys like Guy Charron, Newsy Lalonde, Ron Low, Jack Lynch, Garth Malarchuk, Gord Lane, Tim Hunter, Andy Moog, John Paddock, Yvon Labre, Adam Oates, Ron Ulllyotte, Brian Sutter, Scott Bradley, Robert Picard, Rick Green, Claude Lemieux, Lou Lamoriello and more. As soon as I told them Archie had given me their numbers, they were only too happy to chat about Tommy. They gave me enough stories to fill a book twice this long and their enthusiasm was infectious. After every interview, I'd sit down and write another few thousand words.

When I'd ask those players if they had any suggestions of who else

I should talk to, most of them replied, “Conacher. Tommy loved him.” Pat, who played for Tommy on the Maine Mariners and Utica Devils, and I had a number of chats and I was thrilled when he agreed to write the foreword for *The Funniest Man in Hockey*. He was the logical choice as Tommy had told me that Pat checked in on him virtually every day for the last few years of his life. Thanks, Pat.

I’ve got thousands of words from interviews with Tommy looking back on his career or looking forward to something like the 2016 Heritage Classic alumni game. But where there are quotations from something at the time — in some cases, games or incidents well before I was born — I used archives of *The Hockey News*.

I’d also like to dedicate *The Funniest Man in Hockey* to a couple of friends of mine who aren’t here to read it: Peter Young, long-time broadcaster on CKY-TV in Winnipeg, and I became friends when I was writing *The Hot Line*. Also known as “PY the Sports Guy,” he had great stories from the WHA days and then he became an immense help with three reunions I organized for the three AVCO Cup-winning teams, both promoting them, helping sell tickets, putting together video highlight packages, including the voiceover, of course, and even helping auction items off for charity. I didn’t know it at the time, but Peter had been battling non-Hodgkin lymphoma since about 2012. Or maybe I did know it but didn’t think too much about it because it didn’t seem to slow him down.

He warned me in July 2025 that he was preparing for his last summer at Hillside Beach. We kept in touch over the next few months, and I asked if I could come for a visit to chat about Tommy in January 2026 and he agreed. But really, I wanted to come and say goodbye. We talked for an hour and when I got up to leave, I asked if it was okay to give him a hug. He said, “Okay, but make sure it’s on my right side.” I obliged. “Want to know why?” he asked. “Sure,” I replied. He took my right hand and put it on his left side where I felt what seemed like a football pushing to get out. “That’s my tumour,” he said.

I told him I was proud of him for how he had been handling everything, including taking care of every arrangement, so his wife, Marlene, wouldn't have to. Right down to picking the urn for his ashes. It had an old-school microphone on it, of course. I was honoured to be one of the speakers at PY's service.

And to Ted Foreman, a long-time financial advisor at Investors Group, who I wrote about when he retired because of his giant collection of Jets' memorabilia. He had been very good friends with general manager John Ferguson and had managed the money of many Jets' players in the WHA and early NHL days. He had an expansive Rolodex of players' and coaches' names, and he helped me out numerous times.

I had a lot of time for Ted, even when I was busy like crazy. At the last Jets' reunion that I ran in 2024 in honour of the 1976 Jets, I was busy running around doing last-minute things shortly before the doors opened. We had let Ted in early because he didn't move that quickly anymore. He called me over after he had seen the seating plan. He was at Table 11 but that wouldn't do. He wore No. 12 throughout his hockey career, including with the St. Boniface Canadiens. "Could you switch things around so I can sit at table No. 12?" he asked. "That was my number, you know."

I knew. But instead of telling 16 people to sit at different tables, I grabbed the "12" sign and swapped it with the "11." Same table, different number. It took three seconds, but it made Ted happy.

In June 2018, I met Peter, Ted and Michael Gobuty, former owner of the WHA and NHL Jets, for lunch at Rae & Jerry's, the iconic Winnipeg steakhouse. Somehow, Peter had discovered that Rogie Vachon, former goalie with the Los Angeles Kings and Montreal Canadiens, had come into possession of Michael's 1979 AVCO Cup ring. (It's a long story.) A friend of his had tracked it down and Peter presented it to Michael as we were awaiting our prime rib. During my last visit with Ted, I told him Michael was coming to town in June and that we could go back to Rae & Jerry's for lunch. He called me every few weeks just to dou-

ble-check we were still on and I hoped he'd be able to make it. I met Michael for coffee instead and we raised a cup to Peter and Ted.

My buddy Ted Wyman was the emcee for that last Jets' reunion. As the sports editor of the *Winnipeg Sun*, he also wrote a bunch of stories in advance of all three reunion events. He never just interviewed me; he made it a happening. So, we'd go to the Don Restaurant, the Grove pub or the Falafel Place, have a great meal — and quite possibly some beers — and talk hockey. He was super excited to hold court because he had grown up during the WHA era, just like I had.

Here's how he introduced Tommy for the keynote address that night: "Ladies and gentlemen, this is one of the parts of the evening I've been looking forward to most. We are honoured to have in our midst one of the greatest storytellers in hockey, a man who has been in the game since the mid-1950s and who started coaching in 1972. He coached THREE NHL expansions teams — the Jets and the Washington Capitals and the New Jersey Devils — and suffered through far too many losses as a result, but he was a difference-maker with the Jets in 1978-79. He took over behind the bench in mid-season and led the Jets to a 19-11-8 record and a third-place finish in the standings. Then he led the team to an 8-2 playoff record and a championship. He'll be 84 next week and has joined us from Portland, Oregon. Ladies and gentlemen, please put your hands together for the coach, Mr. Tom McVie!"

Ted was diagnosed with multiple myeloma in the spring of 2024. We exchanged messages regularly and when I was going to visit him that August, I told him I was going to stop by Dairy Queen first. He ordered a chocolate chip cookie dough Blizzard and I had one, too. We enjoyed them in his backyard and had one last fun conversation about hockey (and a little football). Ted lost his battle in November 2024. I think about him often, and always when passing a Dairy Queen. I like to think he'd find that funny.

Thanks also to my kids, Mia and Alex, for tolerating my stories

about “old guy hockey,” my mom, Dawn, for standing in line outside the Winnipeg Arena in the spring of 1979 so I could see a Jets play-off game (with Tommy behind the bench!), my partner Debbie and my stepdaughters, Grace and Ellen, all of whom tolerate my stories, too. Thanks to my buddy Pete Epp, who, when he saw the cover with the original title: *The Tom McVie Story — the Funniest Man in Hockey* said, “I don’t know who Tom McVie is, but I’d read a book called *The Funniest Man in Hockey*.” So, we switched things around. Don’t tell Pete, though.

Lastly, of course, thanks to Tommy. I thoroughly enjoyed talking to everybody in this book to tell one of the most incredible stories in hockey history, one that started in started in 1956 and went on for nearly seven decades.

After his keynote address at the 50-year celebration of the WHA in Whistler in the fall of 2022, Tommy came back to our table while the crowd was picking themselves up off the floor.

“How do you think that went?” he asked me.

“Are you crazy, Tommy? Listen to this place. You KILLED!” I replied.

“Ya think so? Because I’ve been doing this a long time and that might be the best reception I’ve ever had.”

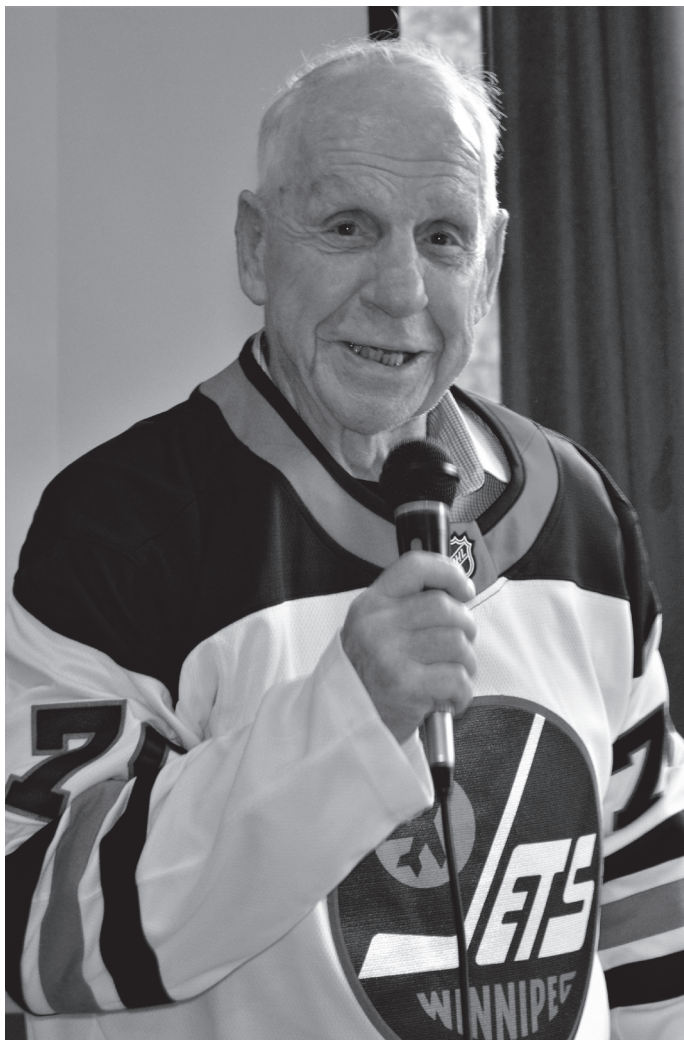
Talk about going out on top.

It would have been so much fun to do a few events together at bookstores to launch *The Funniest Man in Hockey*. I know exactly how they would have gone. I would have asked a question, he would have answered it, and everybody would have joined me in laughing their heads off.



I think this photo — taken at the sponsors' night for the 40-year reunion of the 1978-79 Winnipeg Jets, the last winners of the AVCO Cup — encapsulates my relationship with Tommy perfectly. He's cracking one-liners and I'm cracking up. It's the screen saver on my phone and it always makes me smile.

Photo credit: Cory McCrindle



Except for behind the bench, Tom McVie was most comfortable behind a mic. Here he is entertaining the sponsors of the 40-year reunion of the 1978-79 WHA Winnipeg Jets in June 2019.

Photo credit: Cory McCrindle