

HOCKEY

Avalanche unseat Lightning, nab 3rd Stanley Cup victory

BY STEPHEN WHYNO

AP Hockey Writer

TAMPA, Fla. — Nathan MacKinnon could not find the words. Gabriel Landeskog cracked a smile and a joke.

After years of playoff disappointments, the Colorado Avalanche are back atop hockey's mountain after dethroning the two-time defending champions.

Behind a goal and an assist from MacKinnon, the Avalanche won the Stanley Cup for the third time in franchise history and first in more than two decades by beating the Tampa Bay Lightning 2-1 in Game 6 of the final Sunday night, June 26.

"It's just been building over time," playoff MVP-winning defenseman Cale Makar said about the Avalanche's journey. "I've been here only three years. A couple of tough exits in the playoffs. It was just all leading up to this."

It's the first title for the Avs' core group led by MacKinnon, captain Gabriel Landeskog, Mikko Rantanen and Makar, and it follows several early postseason exits — in the second round each of the past three seasons and the first round in 2018. The 2016-17 team was the worst in hockey, finishing with just 48 points.

"It's hard to describe," said MacKinnon, who led the way in the clincher by blocking shots and taking big hits in addition to his offensive production. "Some tough years mixed in there, but it's all over now. We never stopped believing."

With a mix of speed, high-end talent and the experience gained from those defeats, Colorado broke through this time — earning every bit of the championship by knocking off a deep and gritty team that hoisted the Cup the past two years.

"To beat them is probably a little more satisfying, to be honest, because they are champions," said veteran forward Andrew Cogliano, who hoisted the Cup for the first time at age 35. "They know how to win. And, ultimately, when you can beat the champions, you know you really earned it."

Like the Avalanche fully expected, it wasn't easy.

An early turnover by Makar led to an easy goal by Steven



Douglas R. Clifford/Tampa Bay Times-TNS

Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman Erik Cernak (81) defends the net and Tampa Bay Lightning goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy (88) from Colorado Avalanche center Darren Helm (43) during the first period of the game between the Tampa Bay Lightning and the Colorado Avalanche for Game 6 of the Stanley Cup final on Sunday, in Amalie Arena in Tampa.

Stamkos, putting Colorado in a hole and several more bumps and bruises followed. The Avalanche tied it when MacKinnon beat 2021 playoff MVP Andrei Vasilevskiy with a near-perfect shot and went ahead on another big goal by trade deadline acquisition Artturi Lehkonen. They locked things down by holding on to the puck and held Tampa Bay without a shot on Darcy Kuemper until midway through the third period.

When the Lightning finally did, he was there. Brought in from Arizona in a trade last summer to shore up the sport's most important position, Kuemper was solid again and made his most important save with under seven minutes left when he slid over to deny star Nikita Kucherov.

His teammates finished the job and Colorado improved to 9-1 on the road this postseason.

Much like the Lightning went all in multiple times by trading high draft picks and prospects to load up for the best chance to win the Cup, Avalanche general manager Joe Sakic was not afraid to ante up in March to acquire Lehkonen, defenseman Josh Manson and Cogliano. They became the perfect complement to Colorado's core that had showed plenty of playoff promise but until now hadn't produced a championship.

Sakic, who captained Colorado's first two title-winning teams in 1996 and 2001, used a familiar recipe to get his team over the hump. Much like Pierre Lacroix, the architect of those Avalanche teams that had so much success after the organization moved to Denver, Sakic prioritized skill, speed and versatility.

That speed overwhelmed every opponent on the way to the final, from an opening sweep of Nashville through a hard-fought, six-game series against St. Louis and another sweep of Edmonton. It was a different challenge against Tampa Bay, when the Avalanche needed to absorb counter-punches from the back-to-back champs to close it out.

Tampa Bay ended up two victories short of becoming the NHL's first three-peat champion since the early 1980s New York Islanders dynasty.

"It stings just as much as the first time," Stamkos said, referring to the Lightning's loss to Chicago in the 2015 final.

Before the series, Makar said he and his teammates were trying to end a dynasty and begin a legacy. That legacy finally involves a championship, thanks in large part to steady coach Jared Bednar, who in his sixth season found a way to focus his team on the mission at hand from the start of training camp.

COLLEGE BASEBALL

Mississippi sweeps Oklahoma to claim first College World Series title

BY ERIC OLSON

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — The last team to get into the NCAA baseball tournament was the last team standing.

Mississippi scored twice on wild pitches in a three-run eighth inning and the Rebels won their first national baseball title, sweeping Oklahoma in the College World Series finals with a 4-2 victory Sunday, June 26.

The Rebels (42-23) became the eighth national champion since 2009 to come out of the Southeastern Conference and third straight, and the trophy will stay in the Magnolia State for another year. Mississippi State won last year.

"There is so much to be said for how much we overcame this year, how much we had to fight through, how much we had to pick each other up and never let ourselves get down," team captain Tim Elko said. "The story of our season is going to be told for year and years to come."

Ole Miss benefited from a runner-interference call that took a run away from Oklahoma (45-24) in the sixth inning. The Rebels also over-

came a spectacular pitching performance by Cade Horton, who set a CWS finals record with 13 strikeouts.

Brandon Johnson struck out the side in a 1-2-3 ninth inning to set off a celebration on the field and in the stands where the majority of the 25,972 were Rebels fans dressed in Ole Miss powder blue. Catcher Hayden Dunhurst ran to the mound to embrace and then tackle Johnson after Sebastian Orduño swung and missed on the final pitch.

It was an improbable journey for the Rebels and 22nd-year coach Mike Bianco, who was under fire when his team sat at 22-17 overall and 7-14 in SEC play on May 1.

"I think they've showed a lot of people that you can fall down, you can stumble and you can fail, but that doesn't mean you're a failure," Bianco said. "If you continue to work hard, you continue to push and you continue to believe, you can accomplish anything. That's not some poster or some tweet to motivate you. We've all heard that. These guys have lived that this season."

Ole Miss beat out North Carolina State for the final

at-large bid and had to go on the road for regionals and super regionals. The Rebels finished the season on a 20-6 run, including 10-1 in the national tournament.

Their only loss at the CWS was 3-2 to Arkansas on Wednesday, June 22. The next day, Dylan DeLucia pitched a four-hit shutout to beat the Razorbacks and send the Rebels to the finals. DeLucia was named CWS Most Outstanding Player after allowing one earned run, striking out 17 and walking none in 16 2/3 innings.

Ole Miss, which won the CWS finals opener 10-3, was down 2-1 going into the eighth inning Sunday. Trevin Michael relieved Horton with one out, and Jacob Gonzalez singled through the right side to drive in the tying run.

"Kind of knew we were going to start the scoring in the eighth or ninth," said Gonzalez, 3 for 23 in the CWS before singling twice and homering Sunday. "That's how we are. We're going to put the pressure on. We're not going to strike out and sit down. Luckily, I got a hit and I finally got to help the team out this week."

MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER

Penalty kick helps Timbers to win

PORTLAND (AP) — Sebastián Blanco converted a tiebreaking penalty kick in first-half stoppage time just after 19-year-old goalkeeper Abraham Rodriguez made his Major League Soccer debut in place of injured William Yarbrough, and the Portland Timbers beat the Colorado Rapids 3-0 on Saturday night, June 25.

Yarbrough, a 33-year-old who has made three international appearances for the U.S., sustained a concussion in a collision with Santiago

Moreno at the top of the penalty area in the first minute of stoppage time.

Referee Rosendo Mendoza awarded the penalty kick, and after a lengthy delay, Rodriguez entered in the eighth minute of stoppage time. The goalkeeper dived left while Blanco put the penalty kick the other way for his third goal of the MLS season.

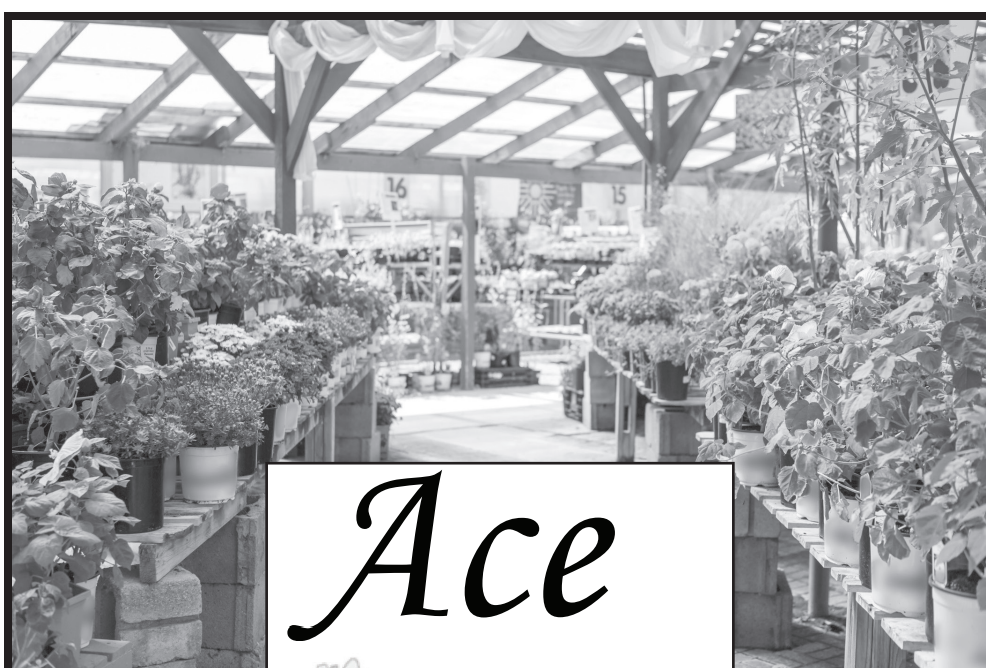
"I was a little nervous, but ready for that situation," said Rodriguez, signed by the Rapids in 2020 as a homegrown player from Thornton, Colorado.

Jaroslav Niezgodza scored a pair of second-half goals for Portland (4-6-7), which ended a six-game regular-season winless streak against Colorado.

Niezgodza, who has five goals this season, scored off passes from Bill Tuiloma in the 54th minute and Eryk Williamson in the 62nd.

Colorado (5-7-4) and Portland both took 19 shots, but the Timbers had a 7-5 edge in shots on goal.

Aljaz Ivacic had four saves for Portland.



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