

Vegas Golden Knights

**How a First-Year Expansion Team
Healed Las Vegas and
Shocked the Hockey World**

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with Deke Castleman
and contributions from
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Author's Note

I've been a rabid hockey fan since my dad took me to my first game at Madison Square Garden when I was nine years old and growing up in Brooklyn. That was when and where my lifelong love of hockey and the New York Rangers began, and it continues to this day, nearly 60 years later.

Though hockey has the smallest fan base of all the major sports, it is by far the most loyal. Why? Mainly, hockey is a family sport. A fan's grandfather, or even great-grandfather, was the first follower of one of the original six National Hockey League teams. He handed down his love of the sport to his kids, who handed it down to their kids, who really had no choice but to do the same with their own. (A side benefit: It sure makes Christmas shopping easy.)

Hockey also has the Stanley Cup. It was introduced to the sport by Frederick Arthur Stanley, 16th Earl of Derby – London-born, Eton and Sandhurst educated, and Governor General of Canada where he and his wife Lady Constance Villiers became avid hockey fans and steered their two boys

into amateur leagues. It was a family affair—then as now. In 1892, Stanley awarded a silver cup to Canada's top team, though he called it the Dominion Hockey Challenge Cup. Since then, it's been revered by seven generations of fans.

The Vegas Golden Knights represent many things to many people, all of which I discuss at length in these pages. But to me, what underlies the incredible outpouring of acclaim and devotion has been the chance not only for families, but for an entire city and even parts of the world, to become hockey fans *at the same time*, rather than having the tradition passed down, which is tough to do with a year-old team. In my opinion, this powerful imprint helps to explain the intensity of the VGK's impact.

I've attended NHL hockey games in countless venues in a couple dozen cities in two countries and I've found the passion and allegiance of the fans to be about equal. Most arenas are filled with season ticket holders who attend most, if not all, of the 41 home games. I always thought that Madison Square Garden had the most fervent fans. But in my entire life, I've never seen the likes of what this Las Vegas team unleashed.

I dedicate this book to the fans brought together by the Vegas Golden Knights and to the powerfully unifying force that is hockey.



Prologue

On November 6, 2017, when Toronto Maple Leafs' forward Zach Hyman crashed into Max Lagacé, the fourth-string goaltender for the Vegas Golden Knights, Max appeared shaken up. Everyone involved with the National Hockey League's Sin City expansion team held its collective breath. The VGK's fifth and final goaltender under contract was Dylan Ferguson, who'd turned 19 a couple months earlier—a scary moment for the fans, even scarier for the VGK organization, but scariest of all, perhaps, for Dylan Ferguson.

Twenty-four year-old Max Lagacé had kicked around the American Hockey League and ECHL for a few years before signing with the Vegas Golden Knights as a free agent. He'd been called up from the Knights' AHL affiliate after Marc-André Fleury, the team's first-string goaltender and shining star, was sidelined with a concussion more than a month earlier. In the ensuing 11 games, second-stringer Malcolm Subban went out with a groin injury,

third-stringer Oscar Dansk went down with a leg injury, and Lagacé found himself starting his first NHL game on Halloween against the New York Rangers.

A fourth-string goaltender playing 15 games into a season is usually a good indication that the rest of the schedule will be painfully long. This would seem especially true for a first-year expansion team.

No one had high hopes for this ragtag collection of cast-offs in their inaugural year. In Las Vegas, we were all hoping for a decent showing and praying that the city would support the NHL's newest franchise enough to make hockey a success in the desert. Many of us had seen the struggles that the Arizona Coyotes, in another desert location, faced since they entered the league: multiple ownership changes, poor attendance even from a state with a large snowbird population, and constant whispers about relocation. Heck, there was even a strong rumor that Arizona was the team that would come to Las Vegas.

As Max Lagacé gathered himself in the third period, the Golden Knights were playing the last game of their longest road trip on the schedule, the sixth in nine days with four of the six played on back-to-back nights. They'd lost three, tied one, and trailed Toronto at the end of the second, outshot 31-6 in the two periods.

They'd had a strong start, setting records: the first expansion team in the NHL's long history to win six of their first seven games and even after three losses in a row on the road, the second expansion team in NHL history to play the fewest games before achieving their ninth win. But at that moment, the Knights were occupying what turned out to

be the most ominous interlude in their celebrated, though short, story. If Max had to leave the game, he'd be replaced by the *fifth*-string goalie, the shoe that the sportswriters and talking heads and bookmakers had been waiting for 15 games to drop.

Max took up his position in front of the net, finished the game, and the rest is the stuff of sports lore and glory.

Is there a more overused idiom than “team of destiny?” Even if there is, it’s usually the *last* statement about a team that was destined to win a big sporting event, such as the Philadelphia Eagles’ victory over the favored New England Patriots in Super Bowl 2018. In this case, however, it’s the least thing that can be said about the Vegas Golden Knights.

Sure, the VGK were the team of destiny in the National Hockey League’s 2017-2018 season. But many of their first-year expansion-team accomplishments—ticket prices, merchandise sales, media attention, fan adulation, and, most of all, record setting—applied not only to the NHL, but *all* major-league sports.

Beyond that, because the first home game was played only nine days after and barely a long block away from the site of the worst mass shooting in U.S. history, the Knights had to embrace the stigma and horror of it. In essence, they set out to heal Las Vegas, to turn themselves into the antidote to Stephen Paddock and the savagery that he perpetrated on the Route 91 Harvest Festival.

And by the time the VGK were winning playoff games, then whole series, finally becoming one of two teams to vie for one of the most coveted trophies on Earth, the support for this team had gone viral. They were the subject of tweets

from—and sold merchandise to—fans in more than 100 countries. The fantastic journey that this team was on grew into an enormous cultural phenomenon, especially for such a transient and skin-deep city like Las Vegas.

The Vegas Golden Knights, in the end, transcended hockey, all of sports, Las Vegas, and the U.S., to enfold the whole world. There will never be another triumph quite like the one that this book chronicles.

Chapter 1

The Groundwork

Las Vegas has been in the Maloof family blood for nearly 90 years, though the first 15 or so were in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Joe G. Maloof, the grandfather, emigrated from Lebanon and settled near relatives in northern New Mexico where he opened a general store. Right after Prohibition, he got rights to distribute Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. After that he picked up Coors and other beer, wine, and alcohol suppliers and set up distribution points throughout New Mexico.

After Joe died, his sons, George and Mike, moved the expanding business to Albuquerque in the late 1940s. George parlayed the liquor distributorship's success into other major ventures, including ownership of First National Bank of New Mexico and the National Basketball Association's Houston Rockets. In 1980, when George passed away suddenly of a heart attack at age 57, his wife Colleen and their two oldest sons, 25-year-old Joe and 24-year-old Gavin, assumed the reins of the businesses.

George Jr., fourth of the five Maloof siblings, attended UNLV where he majored in casino management. After graduating in 1987, he began raising money to open a casino in North Las Vegas on Rancho Drive. The Fiesta debuted in 1994 and George's brothers and sister began getting involved in southern Nevada.

At the time the Maloofs owned the Rockets, they met Gary Bettman, a lawyer for the NBA. Later, the Maloofs also owned the NBA's Sacramento Kings from 1998 until 2013. That's a long story for a rainy day, but when they sold the Kings for \$535 million, brothers Joe and Gavin started looking for a new opportunity in the major leagues. They'd kept in touch with Gary Bettman, who'd risen through the NBA ranks to become general counsel and senior vice president, in pursuit of a team for sale or in an expansion market—and continued their twice-yearly phone calls when Bettman became commissioner of the National Hockey League.

In addition, in 2008, George Maloof, who by now had built the uber-hip Palms Hotel-Casino a mile west of the Las Vegas Strip, was making a list of big events the Palms could host—movie premieres, concerts, the NBA All-Star Game, and various awards shows, including the NHL's. Once again, the Maloofs connected with Bettman. The NHL moved its awards show to the Palms in 2009; it will remain in Las Vegas at least through 2021.

At the same time that they were selling the Kings, the Maloofs found out that MGM Resorts was building an 18,000-seat arena. Joe and Gavin looked at each other and said, "What about an NHL team to play there?"

"In a hundred and fifty years, Nevada never had a



team,” said Gavin Maloof. “I didn’t *think* it would work; I *knew* it would work.”

How could he be so sure? On one hand, the conventional wisdom held that hockey was most popular in places where you can actually play the game. The naysayers pointed to the Arizona Coyotes, based in Phoenix, which consistently ranked near the bottom of the NHL in attendance.

On the other hand, perhaps Gavin Maloof’s confidence had something to do with the 2.3 million residents in the Las Vegas metropolitan area, many of whom come from cities with hockey teams. He knew of the market research indicating that 130,000 hockey fans, making \$55,000 or more, live within 35 miles of downtown Las Vegas. He was certainly aware that Las Vegas is a town of big-time sporting events, such as heavyweight championships, PGA tournaments, NASCAR races, Professional Bull Riders World Finals, the National Finals Rodeo, the National Basketball Association’s Summer League, and the World Series of Poker, and that an NHL team’s home season consisted of 41 big-time special events. He was also no doubt familiar with the fairly long and little-known history of hockey in the neon desert

The Las Vegas Thunder was a team in the International Hockey League in the 1990s, playing their home games at Thomas and Mack Center, the 18,500-seat arena for the University of Las Vegas-Nevada. They were known for an interesting roster of players that included Wayne Gretzky’s younger brother Brent, 17-year-old Radek Bonk who played 13 seasons in the NHL, even a female goaltender, Manon Rheaume, who appeared in two games in 1994. They finished first in their division two out of their six seasons and

made the playoffs in five; they had such a rabid following that the Thunder drew more fans to the Thomas and Mack than the popular UNLV Runnin' Rebels basketball team. When the T&M Center wouldn't renew the Thunder's lease in 1999, the team folded. I still see old-timers here and there around the city, proudly wearing their white-and-silver-on-blue Thunder jerseys with Boom Boom, the ferocious polar-bear mascot, lightning bolt in one hand and hockey stick in the other.

Four years later, another hockey team, the Las Vegas Wranglers, won the hearts of the Thunder fans. The Wranglers were an expansion team in the East Coast Hockey League (now the ECHL), who played in the Orleans Arena for 11 seasons between 2003 and 2014. The Wranglers set all kinds of league records, including the longest win streak (18), highest winning percentage over five seasons (including on the road), fewest penalty minutes in one game (0), and the first team to post three consecutive seasons with more than 100 points. They also made the playoffs in 10 of their 11 seasons, going all the way to the final (the Kelly Cup) in 2007-2008 and 2011-2012. They averaged just under 5,000 tickets sold per game and, like the Thunder at Thomas and Mack, folded only after the Orleans failed to renew their lease and they couldn't find anywhere else to call home. The Wranglers were Las Vegas' second-longest-lived professional sports team, behind the Las Vegas 51s Triple-A baseball team, now in its 38th season.

So an NHL team finding a fan base in Las Vegas wasn't, perhaps, as far-fetched as the naysayers initially believed.

When the Maloofs went to see their acquaintance, hockey commissioner Gary Bettman, about an expansion team for Las Vegas, they said, “We want to be sure it’s a halfway decent team. We don’t want a typical money-losing expansion club.”

Bettman told them, “You have to show us two things. First, you have grass-roots support. And second, you have the arena.”

Joe Maloof later summed up the meeting. “He didn’t say yes. But he didn’t say no.”

The Maloofs returned to Las Vegas, started planning the campaign to sell 15,000 season tickets to locals, and made the deal with MGM for a lease on the arena. In an interview, George Maloof gave “a lot of credit” to Jim Murren, chairman of the board and CEO of MGM Resorts, and Bill Hornbuckle, president of MGM. “Just getting the arena built with no public money was a great accomplishment. They didn’t give away anything by any means, but they did make us a fair deal for hosting the team.”

After the first exploratory meeting with Bettman, the Maloofs’ attorney knew an attorney who had a client interested in owning a major-league sports team. When they first heard the name Bill Foley, the Maloofs thought he was interested only in a football team, so they didn’t see him as a serious partner possibility. But it turned out that he also had an interest in hockey. In early 2014, they struck a partnership deal, then they all went to New York, where the Maloofs introduced Bill Foley to Gary Bettman.



Seventy-four-year-old William Foley II spent the first few years of his life in Austin, Texas—not exactly a hotbed of hockey. But his father was in the U.S. Air Force and Bill Foley moved for the first of a half-dozen times when he was six—to Ottawa, where he learned to ice skate and play street hockey, also known as “shinny.” For three years, he was a member of little neighborhood teams that skated on the frozen ponds of southeastern Canada. He likes to say he’s been “all over” hockey ever since.

Foley graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1967 with a B.S. in engineering; according to Wikipedia, in his spare time as a cadet, he invested in the stock market and earned \$40,000. Apparently, he liked to gamble even then and was good at it. From there, he switched branches to serve in the Air Force. Sent to Seattle to monitor military contracts with Boeing, by his mid-20s, he was negotiating deals in the hundreds of millions; he achieved the Air Force rank of captain.

He earned an MBA from Seattle University, then a law degree from the University of Washington in 1974. While practicing in Phoenix, specializing in corporate and real-estate law, Foley brokered a deal between Fidelity National Title Insurance Company and a small underwriter in Tucson. That led to control of Fidelity National in 1984 in a \$21 million leveraged buyout. For the next 20 years, through a reported 100-plus mergers and acquisitions, Foley and investors turned Fidelity National into the largest title-in-

surance company in the U.S., a Fortune 500 company with a \$4 billion market cap and \$7 billion in annual revenues. Fidelity National is headquartered in Jacksonville, Florida, where Foley flirted with buying the NFL's Jacksonville Jaguars. He remains the Chairman of the Board of FNF, but he and his wife Carol now live in Las Vegas, spending summers in Montana.

Though title insurance helped Foley to achieve an estimated net worth of \$600 million, he found it boring and started expanding his business interests. He served as CEO of CKE, Inc., parent company of Carl's Junior, and bought a 40,000-acre cattle ranch and resort, along with a ski resort and restaurants, in Montana. He also began investing in distressed wineries from California to New Zealand; his Foley Family Wines is based in Sonoma, California. One of his wine labels is Wayne Gretzky Estates – another nod to hockey.

But perhaps Foley's deepest connection to hockey was via his neighbor in Whitefish, Montana: Murray Craven.

Craven is a veteran of 18 NHL seasons, having played on six teams starting in 1982. He retired in 2000 and he and his family moved to a house on Whitefish Lake; when the Foleys bought a summer house on the lake, Bill and Murray became friends and golf partners.

For years, Craven had encouraged Foley to consider buying an existing hockey team, but as he told Dan Rosen, a senior writer for NHL.com, "It was a dead issue for a long time" – until one day out of the blue, Foley announced that he was planning to bring hockey to Las Vegas. From then on, Craven helped Foley navigate the maze of an NHL expansion team.

In a 2016 profile, *Worth* magazine wrote, “Foley has earned a reputation as a skillful and tough executive with an eye for a bargain, a talent for building value, and a passion for cost-cutting. He’s deeply involved in all aspects of his businesses. That way, he says, ‘If there’s a failure, it’s my fault.’”

At the time that Bill Foley and the Maloofs were formalizing the idea of bringing a pro-hockey expansion team to Las Vegas, Foley spoke to Scott Burnside, a senior writer at ESPN, and said that he planned “to be hoisting a Stanley Cup within eight years of seeing the first puck dropped on National Hockey League ice on Las Vegas’ famous Strip.” He added, “I don’t care what it takes.” Not long after, Foley changed the eight years to what became a mantra: “Playoffs in three, Cup in six.”

Burnside, who probably knew that the claim was just a marketing pitch, as the team needed to sell 720,000 seats (18,000 times 41 home games), called Foley’s plan “a speck on some distant hockey horizon.” It certainly seemed like a longshot at the time. The NHL hadn’t expanded beyond 30 teams since 2000 (the first year for the Columbus Blue Jackets and the Minnesota Wild). And in his first week as mayor of Las Vegas in 1999, Oscar Goodman, the mob lawyer turned Vegas politician and cheerleader, had visited the NHL’s Gary Bettman—just he and two showgirls he took with him everywhere—in New York to discuss the possibility of bringing its first major-league team to Las Vegas, with no luck.

On the other hand, the Las Vegas Arena (now T-Mobile) had broken ground seven months earlier and the Foley-Maloof partnership had a lease agreement with the arena

owners, MGM Resorts and Anschutz Entertainment Group (AEG), which owns the NHL's L.A. Kings.

The plan to receive approval from the National Hockey League and the owners of the 30 other teams called for Foley and the Maloofs to solicit support for professional hockey in Las Vegas from individuals and small businesses—not casinos and other big business—via open letters, word-of-mouth, a website, and personal appearances all over the city. If enough people committed in principle, they'd then be asked to put down deposits on season tickets.

The NHL was looking to see strong grassroots support from workaday locals, rather than counting on the casinos to buy up large blocks of tickets to use as comps, tourists taking in games for a new kind of entertainment, or fans of visiting teams following them to Sin City. Las Vegans were limited to eight tickets per person. Basing preliminary approval on a trial season-ticket drive to test the Las Vegas market was unusual, to say the least. But the ticket drive, dubbed Vegas Wants Hockey, was on.



Three days after the Atlanta Thrashers received NHL approval to relocate to Winnipeg and become the Jets in 2011 (for a \$60 million relocation fee to the league), 7,158 season tickets were sold in a pre-sale; the remaining 5,842 were purchased online—in the first four minutes that they became available. It took another 17 minutes to process them and complete the sellout.

Las Vegas hockey had an uphill battle compared to Winnipeg, but Commissioner Gary Bettman was in attendance at the February 10, 2015, press conference at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas, where Bill Foley launched the Las Vegas hockey team's season-ticket sales.

The website VegasWantsHockey.com, in conjunction with a call center to handle queries and ticket purchases, was the main vehicle advertising the estimated per-game prices for seats: from around \$20 for the nosebleed section up to \$220 for center-ice "club" seats. The deposits for season tickets, in increments of one, three, five, and ten years, were for 10% of the actual prices. The goal was to secure 10,000 deposits and no time limit was imposed.

Another angle on it started out as the Las Vegas Founding 50: If you joined the group and sold 60 season tickets, you'd serve on the team's advisory board. It caught on so quickly that it had to be expanded to the Founding 75, which included poker pro Daniel Negreanu; boxing champions Mike Tyson and Floyd Mayweather; Derek Stevens, owner of several downtown casinos; star DJ Steve Aoki; and Steve Sisolak, chairman of the county commission and candidate for Nevada governor, who wrote the ceremonial first deposit check.

George Maloof remembered, "We'd worked on it for nearly three years. It was challenging, but we were also surprised by how quickly ticket sales picked up."

More than 5,000 tickets were sold within two days and 9,000 within a month. By March 30, VegasWantsHockey.com had reached its goal of 10,000 deposits from individ-

Poker Pro Superfan

Daniel Negreanu is one of the world's best-known and most successful poker professionals. He was inducted into poker's Hall of Fame in 2014; he's the second all-time money leader in live tournaments (\$39.7 million cashed); he has six World Series of Poker bracelets and 105 cashes (\$17 million); and he's won two World Poker Tour championships with 23 cashes (\$6.4 million).

Negreanu grew up in Toronto, so like I am with the New York Rangers, he's a diehard and long-suffering fan of the Maple Leafs, which haven't won a Stanley Cup since 1967 (at 51 years, it's the longest current Cup drought in the NHL), which was also the last time they played in the Finals. Also like me, as a life-long hockey fan, when he first heard that Las Vegas was getting an NHL team, he immediately jumped on the bandwagon.

One of the original Founding 50, Negreanu bought 16 season tickets. Four of them are in Section 6, 11 rows behind the benches at center ice. He donates the other 12, in the upper deck, to Bill Foley's charity, the Folded Flag Foundation (which provides grants and scholarships to the wives and children of U.S. military and government personnel who died in service) and Cambeiro Elementary, whose underprivileged students get to attend hockey games.

On theathletic.com, Michael Russo wrote that Negreanu is known by everyone as the "mayor" of Section 6. "He is still largely the face of poker. And he has quickly become the most identifiable celebrity spokesman for the Golden Knights." ♣

uals and announced the second phase of the drive, aimed at casinos, banks, and other big companies that might buy blocks of tickets for their biggest customers, employee incentive-travel perks, and sponsorships. Also around that time, Bill Foley bought a house and office property in Summerlin, a sprawling master-planned community located 12 miles west of the Las Vegas Strip in the western Las Vegas Valley.

By May 15, deposits on 13,000 tickets had been received and on September 19, 2015, seven months after launching the drive, the season tickets were sold out: 16,000 for the 2017-2018 hockey season. Some deposits were for tickets for a quarter or half of the season, while many buyers no doubt planned to scalp the tickets on the resale market. Even so, it was a remarkable show of support—given that the T-Mobile Arena had only 17,500 seats and wouldn't even be completed for another six months, not to mention that the nameless team was still waiting for approval from the NHL.