

KURT STREETER



GREAT OUTDOORS: Ducks' Rob Niedermayer brings the Stanley Cup to the rural home of friends Albert and Elizabeth Comfort in Cranbrook, Canada.

So close they could touch it

THERE it is, in the airport parking lot, sitting humbly in a large, blue case. People huddle near it. A woman blushes. A man tells his wife to take a picture. "Honey," he says, "the Cup is in there."

Take a break from overpaid athletes, even from their fans. Take a break from the cheating, the gambling, the fighting and the drug abuse. Take a trip with me through rural British Columbia with the Stanley Cup, the trophy given each year for more than a century to the best team in professional hockey. This year, it belongs to the Anaheim Ducks.

When the Ducks bruised and slashed their way to the NHL championship in June and won the Cup, they inherited its madcap tradition, one of the greatest traditions surrounding any trophy in any sport. During the off-season, each player on the championship team gets the Cup for at least one day. He can do with it pretty much whatever he wants.

This year, and in the past, winners have taken the Cup to cities and towns in many parts of the world, including Canada, Sweden, Finland, Japan, Mexico, Russia, the Bahamas, several countries in Europe and to the four corners of the United States.

At this moment, 9 p.m. on a recent Sunday, it is Rob Niedermayer's turn. Niedermayer, a Ducks forward, has brought the Stanley Cup to Cranbrook, population 20,000. Here, in Canadian logging country, with its muddy farms and riverbanks and villages, the Cup, a well-worn, waist-high trophy, casts an intoxicating spell. People come in droves to see it. They walk toward it slowly.

They speak reverently about its history and its myths. For a moment here on a quiet evening in the Canadian countryside, there is no cheating or gambling or fighting.

Only awe. Niedermayer takes the Cup from its blue case. He holds it in his large hands and slogs through wet grass and cow manure to a farm owned by a close friend. Several dozen people surround the trophy, a series of round, silver platforms topped by a large bowl.

Niedermayer puts the Cup down on a bale of hay. The people stare at it, transfixed. Some break out in song. *O Canada, glorious and free...*

"There it is," says Barney Bentall, a musician, who is Niedermayer's father-in-law. "It's slightly like the Super Bowl." Bentall is in a trance. "Only this you can touch, you want to touch it... [for Canadians], it's because of what it means."

From under his cowboy hat, Bentall ticks off things that make the Stanley Cup special: how the trophy has grown to accommodate the inscribed name of every player on every winning team, how this very trophy sitting on the bale of hay has been handed down from champion to champion for decades.

The lore fascinates him. How this all started in 1892, when Sir Frederick Arthur Stanley bought the Cup for the equivalent of \$50 and presented it to the champion Canadian hockey team. How the Cup has been lost, then found; its history stolen, then recovered. How it travels with a pair of "Cup keepers" — essen-



PROTECTIVE SERVICES: Retired Royal Canadian Mounties Dave Kirkby, left, and Lloyd Ferguson stand guard over the Stanley Cup at a party hosted by Rob and Scott Niedermayer in the British Columbia town. The trophy was met with awe, fascination and tears in its travels through Canada.



IN ITS PRESENCE: Nurses are thrilled to see the Cup at East Kootenay Regional Hospital in Cranbrook, brought by Scott Niedermayer, left, and his brother Rob. People came in droves to make contact with the NHL trophy, inspired by its lore and ties to their country.

tially security guards, though they hardly look the part with their loose jeans, untucked shirts and easy smiles.

How the players have dropped it and banged it. How they have used the trophy as a beer mug, a wine glass and a christening bowl.

It breathes. You can feel it. Rub your finger along the engravings and touch the scratches, the dents and the occasional gashes. The Cup lives, like we do, imperfectly. The misspellings are many. The BOSTON BRUINS are from BOSTON. The 1980-81 NEW YORK ISLANDERS are the ISLANDERS.

One hockey team won the Stanley Cup five years running. The goalie's name is spelled differently five times. "It's just unique," Bentall says, quietly, his eyes gleaming. The names on it are "guys from small towns... guys who take it back home. This trophy has that small-town feel, and that is so much part of our culture...."

"This trophy is Canada." The next morning, Rob Niedermayer's brother, Scott, a Ducks defenseman, joins the celebration. Scott's name is all over the Cup. Before coming to the Ducks, he won three championships with New Jersey.

In years past, when Scott brought the Cup home to Cranbrook — three stoplights on downtown's busiest street — Rob studiously avoided touching it. There is a myth: If a player touches the Cup before winning it, he's jinxed. He'll never play on a championship team.

"Finally, I can touch it," Rob says. "Last night, my wife and I put it right by our bed. I slept touching it."

Nearly 1,000 people are lined up at the Cranbrook ice rink. A woman tells me that she has driven eight hours for this. She has tears in her eyes. A man says the hair on his neck is standing straight. Another says it's like seeing the Holy Grail. Still another, too old to dream of NHL glory, places his hands on the Cup. He says he doesn't want to wash them. "Just think! Gretzky touched it!"

All week, it is like this. Awe. Amazement. Respect. The Niedermayer brothers take the Cup to a police station, a barbershop, a McDonald's. They take it on a ski resort chair lift, nestling it between them.

Undeterred by reports of a grizzly bear, they stop by a shallow river, snapping photos. Nearby, a family enjoying a picnic stands up. "I never thought I'd see it," says the son, barely able to contain his glee. "The Cup! Never."

A day later, the brothers take the Cup to Ferme, population 5,000, 60 miles east of Cranbrook.

The spell is just as strong. Half the town, it seems, queues up in front of City Hall. Marty Williams, who works for a mining company, waits an hour to get close. Then he lifts 2-month-old Rhys and gently lets his smiling baby flop into the bowl.

You let your son touch the Cup, now what? I ask.

"Well, yeah," Williams says. "It's bad luck to let him touch the Cup if we want him to win it. I guess maybe we jinxed his NHL career. But this moment, it's good luck for life."

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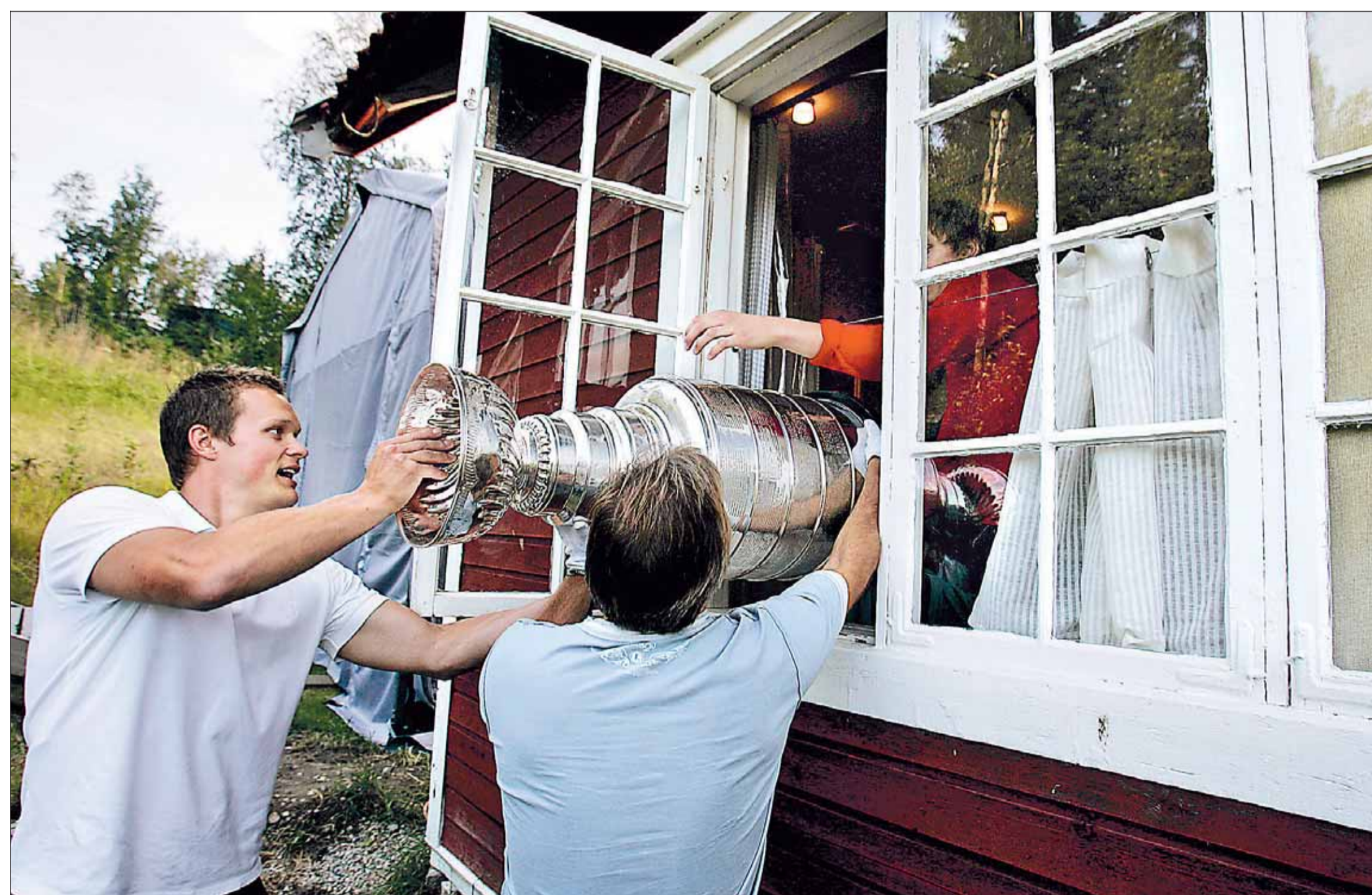
THE CUP KEEPERS: Witnesses to history



STEPPING UP: Mike Bolt, a Hockey Hall of Fame "keeper of the Cup," totes the Stanley Cup on an escalator after appearing at Grauman's Chinese Theatre in July.



BELT TIGHTENING: Cup keeper Walt Neubrand straps the Cup in as Samuel Pahlsson's dogs Kingen and Luke watch at Pahlsson's home in Ornskoldsvik, Sweden.



GLASS ACT: Samuel Pahlsson and Cup keeper Phil Pritchard, right, sneak the Cup in by the back window at Pahlsson's house as friends and family gather for a party in front yard.

Carrying it is their charge

The Stanley Cup inspires awe and honor. So it is with reverence that its NHL chaperons work their hands into white gloves to carry it, protect it, polish it, cradle it. The Cup is never without its keepers, who, by rotating the duty, go where it goes. To Samuel Pahlsson's home in Sweden. To the beach at Huntington. To Cranbrook, Canada. Thousands of miles to cover this past summer, but there was little sleep for the keepers. When it was on the move, they either laid it in a big blue box to be checked in at the airport or secured the car seat belt around it as carefully as they would with a small child. And, at the end of each day, the keepers gently wiped away the kisses and fingerprints of those who had been roused by the mantra: If you see it, you will touch it. For in its five bands of silver live the names of hockey's legends.



Travels with the Cup

In the last few months, members of the Ducks' organization took the Stanley Cup to far-flung places in Russia, Sweden, Finland, Canada and the United States.



COMING CLEAN: Mike Bolt scrubs down the Stanley Cup in the shower of his room at the Hotel Saskatchewan in Regina, Canada, on July 24. Less than 24 hours earlier, Bolt and the Cup were in Big Rapids, Mich., with the Ducks' Chris Kunitz.

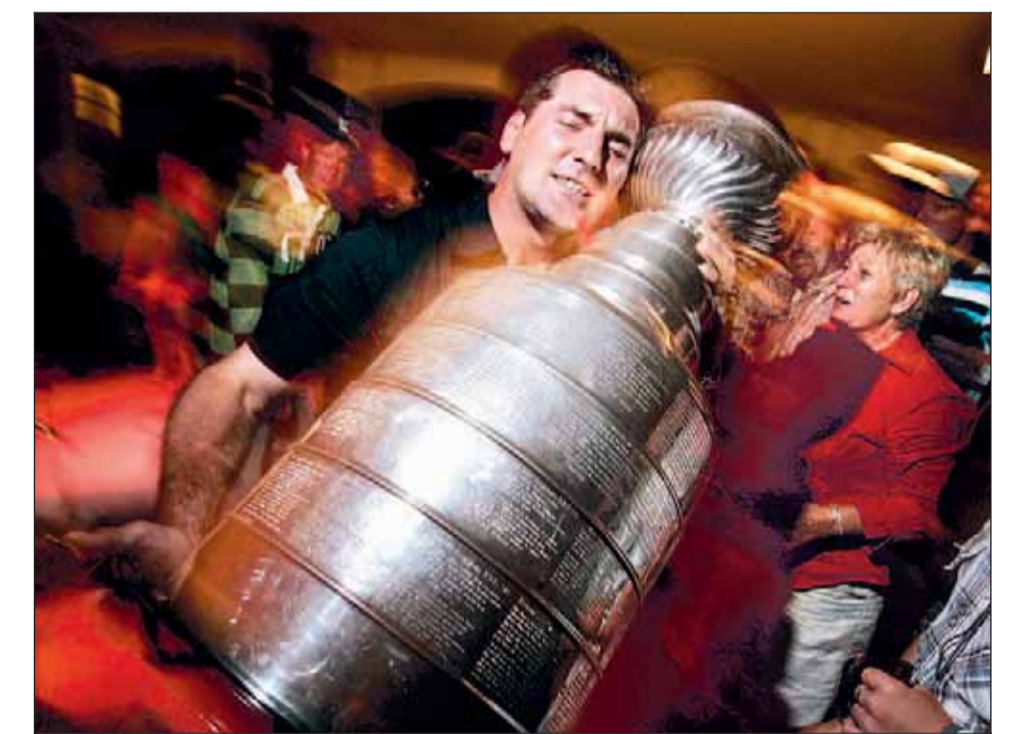
TIME WITH THE CUP: Teemu Selanne, Jean-Sebastien Giguere and Francois Beauchemin



JUST HIS CUP OF TEA: An estimated crowd of more than 10,000 fills Rautatientori Square in downtown Helsinki, Finland, to celebrate the arrival of the Stanley Cup and hometown hero Teemu Selanne, who soaks up all the adulation the crowd has to offer. ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times



GOOD PLACE FOR A NAP: Francois Sasseville puts his 5-day-old daughter, Amelia, inside the Cup, but she probably won't remember posing for the photo.



HE'S REALLY QUITE A CROONER: Francois Beauchemin serenades his friends and family with a French Canadian love song, perhaps influenced by the joy of holding the Stanley Cup so near and dear to his heart.



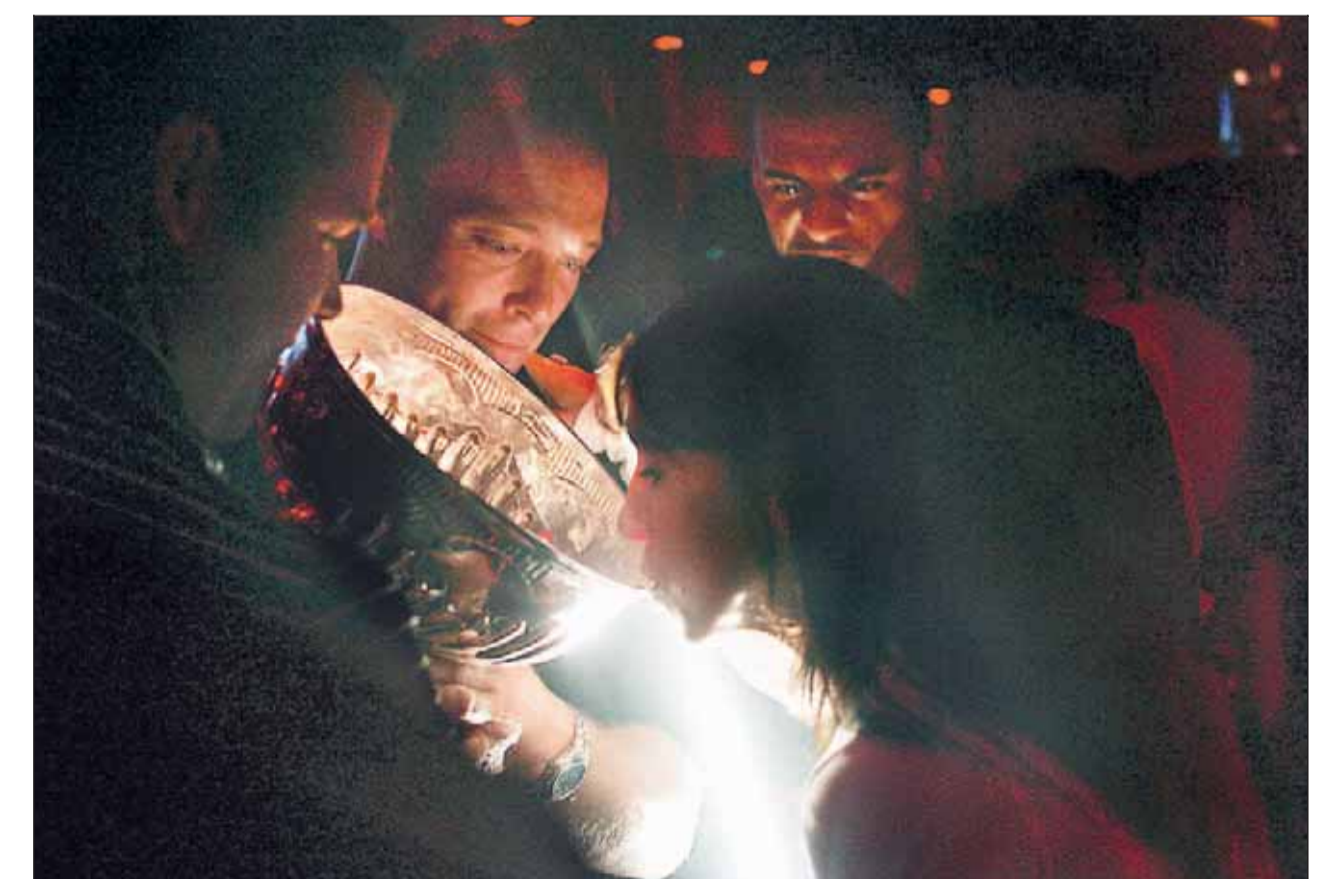
FLIGHT OF THE CONQUEROR: Francois Beauchemin gets ready to board a helicopter that will take him to Parc Regard-sur-le-Fleuve, Canada — about 50 miles northeast of Montreal — where thousands await the Cup.



RAY OF SUNSHINE: Away from the crowds, Selanne takes some time to sign an autograph for Aki Vaisanen, 11, a patient at Helsinki Children's Hospital who seems extremely pleased not only for a chance to meet an NHL star but also to be in the presence of hockey's biggest prize.



SOME ROMANTIC EVENING: For Jean-Sebastien Giguere, it's the best of all worlds as he and his wife, Kristen, pose for an intimate moment with the Stanley Cup in the privacy of their home. Kristen does not seem to be as pleased with her husband's arrangement.



DAYS OF WINE AND POSES: Jean-Sebastien Giguere helps hold up the Cup so that a friend can take a drink from the treasured chalice during a raucous party at the Moomba Superclub this summer in Laval, Canada. It isn't the first time — nor will it be the last — that the Cup has been used in this way.

TIME WITH THE CUP: Travis Moen, Samuel Pahlsson, Ryan Getzlaf, Chris Kunitz

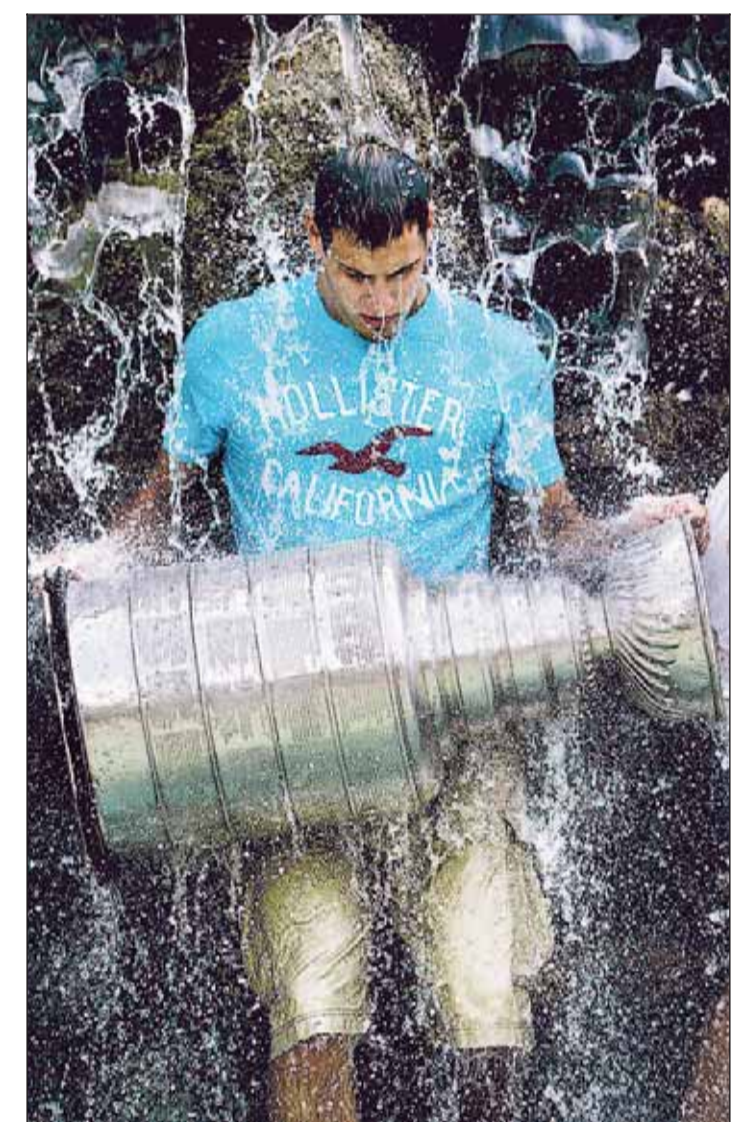


THE PATH BEGINS: Travis Moen walks a dusty road in Stewart Valley of Saskatchewan, Canada, near his family's 3,500-acre cattle ranch and grain farm as he spends his first few hours with the cup posing for family photos.

ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times



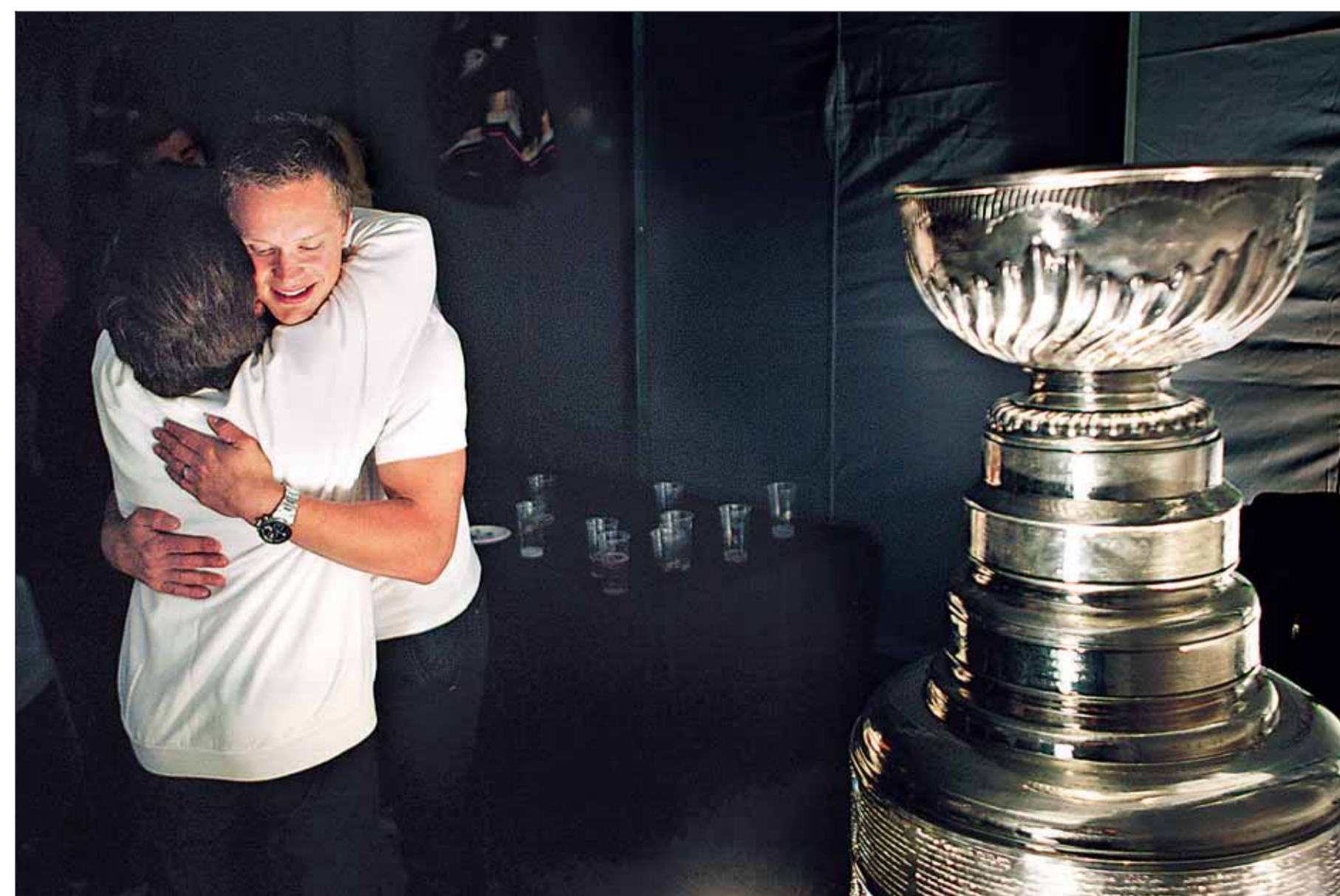
INSTANT MEMORY: All ages get a chance to touch the glory of the Stanley Cup at the home of Samuel Pahlsson in Ornskoldsvik, Sweden, on Aug. 1.



SPLASHDOWN: The waterfall at Kiwanis Park near downtown Regina, Canada, provides great relief on a hot, humid day for Ryan Getzlaf, who was there to take family photos with the Stanley Cup on July 24.



THE MOUNTIES UNDERSTAND: After the car he is in is pulled over for running a stop sign at 2:30 a.m. on July 26, Travis Moen does his best to persuade a local mountie to let the driver off with a warning. Mike Bolt, the "Keeper of the Cup," who was behind the wheel, got off without a ticket.



APPRECIATION AT HOME: Pahlsson's warm reception continues in his hockey-mad Swedish hometown of Ornskoldsvik on Aug. 1.



SAYING GOODBYE: Chris Kunitz plants a heartfelt kiss on the Stanley Cup as his time with the trophy ends in a suite at the Hotel Saskatchewan on July 24.