

Sam Dethrones The King A "Ref's Eye View"

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The NTHL's annual event in Ste Sophie was a hotly-contested affair, not only by the veteran adults who made the trek, but also by many children from the local school league who enthusiastically participated.

The event was also filmed by Derek Williams and Brian Gard from Visual Rhodes in Oakville. They came to get invaluable footage for their table hockey film-in-progress, and they remarked that this was the biggest Coleco tournament they had ever seen, unfolding in one of the smallest towns they had ever visited. That's table hockey for you: Big things happen in small places.



More than 50 adults and children faced off in Ste Sophie, Quebec

The final series of the day, between Carlo "The King" Bossio and Sam "The Slickster" Anoussis, proved to be the most entertaining and dramatic, and one of the best I have ever seen. Sam prevailed in a thrilling and also controversial game #5, dethroning The King and winning his first NTHL event since Ajax 2011.

As it was my privilege to referee their entire series, I want to give you a "ref's eye view." Let's pick up the action in the semifinals, which featured Gino (#1 seed) against Sam (#4 seed) and Andre (#2 seed) against Carlo (#3 seed) -- seedings based on A-pool round-robin rankings.

Gino had already expended valuable energy finishing on top of the A-pool, and then taking out Michel Decarie in 5 games after trailing 0 games to 2 in their quarter final. By contrast, Sam had contained his fury all day, and had plenty in the tank to overpower Gino in the semis.

In the other semi final, Andre did well to win a game against Carlo, but The King was not to be denied a spot in the finals. That set up his showdown against Sam. At this point the odds-makers might have favored Carlo: he has a phenomenal record in final series, and his opponent had just beaten Gino. It's hard enough beating either Bossio in a playoff, let alone both of them back-to-back.

But this day the odds-makers would have been mistaken to pick Carlo. Sam was not the underdog: he was the overdue. He proved it by winning the first game convincingly, 5-2. Carlo prevailed in game 2, by 4-3. Then Same won game #3 by the same margin, 4-3. Refeing these games, I had a bird's eye view of Sam's tenacious defense and relentless offense. He simply outplayed The King.

Sam seemed to pause for breath in game 4, not a good idea against the King. Carlo conjured up a blizzard of goals, and he mercied Sam 7-0 in about 2 minutes flat.



Carlo versus Sam: A Final for the Ages

That set the stage for game 5. Either Sam would win it and get the monkey off his back, or Carlo would prevail yet again, and this time the hard way. Or, as it turned out, something crazier would happen.

From the opening face-off, the action was unbelievably fast and furious. The puck hardly stood still, yet both players exhibited remarkable control. It was the highest level of table hockey that I have ever seen.

Tied at 4-4, with overtime looming, Sam scored from a face-off at center ice. To me (and to the other spectators), it looked as though he had put it in cleanly with his center. That being a first-touch, I disallowed the goal. Sam immediately objected that he had drawn the puck back to his right defenseman and scored from there, which would have been a second touch and thus a legal goal. Carlo disagreed. He claimed that the puck has been shot in directly by Sam's centerman, in which case the goal was a first-touch and hence illegal.

Since I hadn't seen the defenceman score, I overruled both players and disallowed the goal, at least for the time being. The series was being videoed, but with only 13 seconds left I didn't want to halt play indefinitely to watch the film. The players agreed to finish the game, and we all agreed to review the video afterwards and make the call from there.

As things turned out, Carlo scored with 6 seconds to play and won game four 5-4 for the time being, but Sam kept his cool and awaited the camera's verdict.

So we loaded up the video, and stepped through Sam's controversial goal more-or-less frame by frame. These days our video cameras are high-definition, but still not high-speed. With the SoHo boards plus the Marinoff puck, the game is so fast that the high-definition camera cannot accurately capture the puck's full trajectory. There's a black blur in a given frame that represents the puck, and then a frame where the puck disappears entirely (because it's moving too quickly for the camera), and then a black blur in the next frame where it briefly re-appears somewhere else.

The only way to resolve such matters more decisively is with a high-speed (as opposed to merely a high-definition) camera. Yet, every sport encounters controversial calls -- even the NHL and NFL, with their arrays of high-speed cameras.

In this case, the video replay seemed to show that Sam was correct: the goal in question had apparently been scored by Sam's right defense. After several replays of the replay, it looked to me (and to most of the players watching the video) as though one or both centermen had touched the puck before the defenseman, making the goal legal. Carlo contended that Sam's defenseman had hit the centerman and not the puck, making the goal illegal. But the video did not show this conclusively. Right or wrong, I called what I thought I saw. So we resumed play with 13 seconds on the clock, and Sam leading 5-4.

As fate would have it, Sam scored an "insurance" goal from another face-off, won 6-4, and claimed the series 3 games to 2. One way or another, Sam deserved it. His somewhat tainted victory is also a testament to Carlo's greatness: See what it takes to beat him? Not many have it. On a given day, Sam still does.



Carlo (2), Sam (1), Andre (3)

Carlo's hand (photo above) may be cramping, as he is not used to holding up two fingers. Sam appears to be smiling after his big win. Andre Pigeon took third in a plucky performance against Gino, who finished fourth. Eric Larochelle rounded out the top 5 with a strong performance.

For his part, Carlo was gracious in defeat, and could also afford to be: for win or lose, Carlo had already clinched his second consecutive NTHL World Cup on top of seven straight HTQ championships. This season, Carlo had three titles coming into Ste-Sophie, and this was the last event of the season. Pat and Gino had one title each (and Pat was absent), so neither player could catch Carlo on this day.

Even so, Sam got the second-place monkey off his back -- and not just any monkey: in this case King "Kong" Carlo himself. Sam has a closet full of second-place trophies, most of them from finals against Carlo. And while most players can only dream of reaching an NTHL final, Sam is a ferocious competitor who is never satisfied with anything less than winning it all.

I have known Sam since the "old days" -- the Montreal Table Hockey League of the early 1980s, when he was just as ferocious. And even then, Sam had a special play that he kept on tap, for scoring a big goal from a late-game face-off. In those days, we faced off in the corner circles too. Most players tried to draw the puck into the corner with their wingers, but Sam had perfected the art of whipping the puck to his center and slamming it into the next, in one motion off the draw.

So I was not surprised to see Sam perfect a new variation on this theme: drawing the puck back to his defenseman with the center, and slamming it into the net from there.

One thing I learned from this amazing final is that the players have a better view of the puck than the ref and the spectators, because we are looking at it sideways as it flashes past our field of vision -- whereas the two players see it travel along its axis of motion, and so get a longer view. A referee can only call what he sees, and so I did.

But let me tell you, this was the best I have ever seen Sam play, and Carlo matched him in speed and finesse. It was an historic series, a great credit to the players and our sport.

The kids had a fantastic time playing too, and being filmed by Derek and Brian, who got some great shots and interviews for their film-in-progress.



Under-18 Division B Finals: Anne-Sophie Demers takes on Gabriel Constantin

The under-18 playoffs were crowd-pleasers too. Three kids won the combined adult-kid C Division: Eric Paris (1), Vincent Soulard (2), Dany Lafrenier (3). The kids' A Division winners were William Dumas (1), William Bergeron (2), Marc Antoine (3); while the B division winners were Gabriel Constantin (1), Anne-Sophie Demers (2 and top female), Justin Baril (23).

Finally, thanks to all the teachers and staff at the Ste Sophie de Levrard School, for hosting this historic event, much of which has been preserved on film and will be viewed in the ripeness of time.