

A Delayed Ending to Game 4 Has Instant Aftershocks

Players and officials needed an extra moment to realize Colorado had scored in overtime. Now, Tampa Bay trails 3-1 and needs to quickly move on from a goal it believes should not have counted.



By Ben Shpigel

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TAMPA, Fla. — The game that ushered the Colorado Avalanche to the precipice of winning their first Stanley Cup in over two decades had ended a minute or two earlier, and the Hockey Hall of Famer at the back of the freight elevator at Amalie Arena stared straight ahead as it descended the seven flights to ice level.

His face betrayed no hint as to what he had just witnessed — the puck that vanished, the confusion that reigned, the euphoria that followed — or to what it meant to him, the man who assembled the juggernaut of these N.H.L. playoffs.

Before Game 4 of the finals Wednesday night, it was he, Joe Sakic, now the Avalanche's general manager, who had scored the franchise's most memorable goal this millennium. He ceded that distinction — happily, presumably — to Nazem Kadri, whose shot off the rush fooled everyone, including Lightning goalie Andrei Vasilevskiy, the on-ice officials and a home crowd in Tampa unaccustomed to silence.

When finally spotted in the netting, the puck offered confirmation not only of Colorado's 3-2 overtime victory but also of an overarching truth this series, and in this postseason. The Lightning might have the bona fides and the tenacity of a two-time defending champion, but Colorado has been the superior team.

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NAZEM KADRI COUNTER FOR THE OT WIN !!

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The Avalanche have played 18 playoff games and won 15. They swamped Nashville, St. Louis and Edmonton — sweeping the first and third rounds — before prevailing three times against the Lightning, twice in overtime, dominating both extra periods. Their speed and skill and special teams — seven goals to Tampa Bay’s one — have overwhelmed Tampa Bay, just as Sakic had hoped they would heading into the series. On Wednesday, Kadri and five players acquired within the last year — and three ahead of the trade deadline, in Andrew Cogliano, Nico Sturm and Artturi Lehkonen — combined for six points on the tying and winning goals.

Colorado can hoist the Cup with one more win, as soon as Friday night in Denver, where in the comforts of the mile-high altitude the Avalanche thumped the Lightning by 11-3 in Games 1 and 2.

“Obviously, they’re probably preaching, ‘They’ve never been here; they’re going to be tight,’ and that’s fair,” the Colorado star center Nathan MacKinnon said. “But we’ll be ready to go. We’ve been great under pressure all playoffs, all season.”

MacKinnon is correct, by all accounts. Perennial contenders, Colorado hadn't played for the Cup since 2001, when Sakic scored the clinching goal in Game 7 against the Devils, or in the conference finals since 2002. This despite rolling to the Presidents' Trophy last season, for having the N.H.L.'s best record, despite boasting a feared collection of talent, including MacKinnon, whose strides should be measured by a seismograph, forward Mikko Rantanen and the Norris Trophy-winning defenseman Cale Makar, whose comparisons to Bobby Orr might seem like sacrilege if they weren't so striking.

Sometimes, though, in the grueling pursuit of a Cup, teams benefit from luck, from happenstance and circumstance and from boundless pain tolerance: from facing lesser goalies in the first three rounds to Kadri's surgically repaired right thumb regaining enough function to merit his rejoining the lineup after a three-week absence.

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"Just thinking I was done and then having a sliver of hope, sitting here right now, it's kind of surreal," Kadri said, adding, "This is what I've been waiting for my whole life pretty much."

In Game 4 of their second-round triumph against St. Louis, Kadri scored a hat trick mere hours after receiving racist death threats from fans for a collision that knocked Blues goalie Jordan Binnington out of the series. In another Game 4, on Wednesday, Kadri finished off a sequence that began with a sweet pass from goalie Darcy Kuemper — who, sensing the Lightning were tired, had the awareness to push the puck up ice — and roof the puck past Vasilevskiy. Or so it seemed.

For a few seconds, no one celebrated, in a moment that evoked another anticlimactic overtime game-winner from the finals, scored by Chicago's Patrick Kane in 2010 to clinch the title over Philadelphia. Then Kadri started nodding, the bench started emptying and the Lightning started skating off the ice, their hopes for a third consecutive title in peril.

Even to reach this stage, they had to outlast the league's two highest-scoring teams, Toronto and Florida, and overcome a 2-0 series deficit against the Rangers, all while starting every series on the road. To extend this one, the Lightning must stifle an unholy trinity of disappointment: losing in overtime, at home, on a goal they believed should not have counted.



Andrew Cogliano, third from left, a trade-deadline acquisition, scored the tying goal for Colorado. Mark J. Rebilas/USA Today Sports, via Reuters

Walking into his postgame news conference, Tampa Bay Coach Jon Cooper looked like he needed a stiff drink, a hug or some time alone in a soundproof room with the officiating crew — or all three, really. He took one question before excusing himself, sounding defeated as he lauded his team’s accomplishments in a salary-cap era that stifles would-be dynasties before veering into a cryptic response that disputed the legitimacy of Kadri’s goal.

“This one is going to sting much more than others,” Cooper said, adding, “You’re going to see what I mean when you see the winning goal. And my heart breaks for the players. Because we probably still should be playing.”

As he reiterated Thursday, Cooper, a former lawyer, contended, based on replays ricocheting across social media, that Colorado had too many men on the ice when Kadri scored — that MacKinnon lingered too long, too far from the Avalanche bench, when Kadri jumped on. The league, in a statement issued Thursday morning by its department of hockey operations, said that none of the officials considered it a violation, and that the call was not subject to video review.

Though he did say Thursday the team must move on, neither time did Cooper mention, naturally, that the Lightning benefited from a similar noncall last postseason, when they appeared to have had an extra player on the ice for the goal that ousted the Islanders in Game 7 of their semifinal

series. In hockey, if not in life, these moments tend to even out, and neither the interpretation of a rule nor the vagaries of a puck could minimize Colorado's authority in overtime, when it nearly scored on plenty of other occasions.

According to Natural Stat Trick, the Avalanche have registered 75 more total shots at even strength than the Lightning. They have 11 more high-danger scoring chances. They have stressed Tampa Bay through the neutral zone and between the circles and below the goal line.

This is how they have won all season, all postseason, and unless Tampa Bay can summon one final thrust — and then another, and then another — the next time Sakic goes down an elevator to the ice, it will be to lift the Stanley Cup.