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FEATURED

## Lord Stanley's Cup pays a brief visit to the Cataract City

NHL: Keeper Phil Pritchard brings Cup by Gazette office.

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James Neiss/staff photographer Phil Pritchard, Hockey Hall of Fame vice president and keeper of the Stanley Cup, show Tuesday in Niagara Falls.

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NIAGARA FALLS — A brief, but memorable visit Tuesday morning by the world's most famous sports championship trophy — the Stanley Cup — quickly drew a small crowd of curious on-lookers and slow-moving traffic to the front of the Niagara Gazette's downtown office building on Third Street.

In a perfect Western New York world, the 127-year-old, three-foot-tall, 37-pound chunk of sterling silver would have arrived in celebration of the Buffalo Sabres winning their first-ever National Hockey League championship.

But these days it was just another one of more than two dozen visits by the Cup to this area over the past four decades, thanks to its trusty guardian and historian since 1988, Burlington, Ontario native Phillip Pritchard, who considers himself “one of the luckiest people alive.”

He just might be.

Pritchard, the official “Keeper of the Cup,” and a small entourage of assistants, made a regal arrival to the Gazette at about 11:15 a.m. Tuesday. Wearing white gloves, Pritchard delicately lifted the Cup out of a large chest, placing it softly on a bench in front of the Gazette, drawing a small crowd almost immediately.

“I think I'm pretty fortunate because I get to hang out with the greatest trophy in the world,” Pritchard said. “I look after it, but I think most of all it's a public relations thing. It's a security thing and it's an historic thing. To hang out with a 36-inch inanimate object that everyone loves is pretty special and pretty honorable.”

Having witnessed the same immediate response everywhere he goes with it, Pritchard, who's gained tremendous notoriety over the years as the Cup's keeper, said the almost universal reaction to it is why it's important that he continue to travel the globe with the prized trophy — the smiles and sincere interest it generates in people everywhere, many of whom may know little or nothing about the sport itself, but immediately recognize its iconic size and shape.

“I’ve been to Niagara Falls several times in my life, being such a short drive from Burlington,” Pritchard said. “There’s a huge contingent of hockey fans here in this area — Buffalo, Fort Erie — there’s hockey fanatics here, so it’s always great bringing it here. And you can see the fans coming up behind us. It’s pretty special.”

Traffic in front of the Gazette building, 473 Third St., slowed to a crawl while Gazette employees, led by publisher John Celestino, poured out of the building to have a look and a small crowd began to gather. People took turns having their picture taken with the Stanley Cup, most greeting it with that same childlike look of disbelief.

The most asked question was, “Is that the ‘real’ Stanley Cup?” to which Pritchard patiently, though redundantly, assured everyone that yes, it truly was. Soon, cell phones were popping up like a good Donatello’s dinner across the street and everyone wanted to have their picture taken with the Cup.

Pritchard was more than happy to comply, even allowing passers by to go up and touch it. “Go ahead, put your arm right around it,” he said encouragingly to one awestruck, shy, smiling woman who sat to have her picture taken with it.

“I’ve brought it to Niagara Falls at least two dozen times. Most recently (Buffalo native) Patrick Kane (of the Chicago Blackhawks) brought it home three times and (retired NHL coach) Scotty Bowman is from this area and we brought it to him, as well as by Canisius and Buffalo universities. There’s a lot of hockey here.”

While the struggling Sabres franchise remains a sore subject these days in a hockey-crazed community that has suffered through two Finals defeats (1974-75 and 1998-99), the Cup remains as popular as it ever was in our lifetimes in Western New York as a symbol of the great sport and its storied history.

“I think that’s what makes it pretty special — the aura behind it, the superstition behind this great game, and of course, the tradition. It’s all right there,” Pritchard said. “It started in 1893 and today it’s 36 inches and almost 37 pounds. It has almost 127 years of

hockey history on it and every team that's ever won is still on there. When people see it, they see the history, but they love the memories — the Gordie Howes, the Bobby Orrs, the Wayne Gretzkys — everything, it's all right here.

“You look at it closely and it's got dings and dents, but I think, when you and I are 127, we might have a few dings and dents as well,” Pritchard said.

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[Stanley Cup visits the Gazette](#)

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