

# NHL '94 tournament comes to Vancouver for iconic video game's 25th birthday

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Jamil Karimani kisses his trophy after winning the King of '94 tournament in Las Vegas in September 2017.  
*SUBMITTED / JAMIL KARIMANI*

The greatest hockey video game of all time turns 25 this fall.

NHL '94, the third game in EA Sports' long-running franchise, was released in October 1993. A quarter-century later, it remains as popular as ever, even as every single skater in the game has retired. (The last, 46-year-old Jaromir Jagr, played what was likely his final NHL game in January.)

That popularity will be on full display at the third King of 94 tournament, which will be held in Vancouver in October.

King of 94 is the brainchild of Mikey McBryan and Darrell Sampson, who connected through the NHL '94 online community at [NHL94.com](http://nhl94.com) (<http://nhl94.com/>). According to Sampson, McBryan was working on a documentary about the video game and he wanted a tournament to be at the centre of it. Sampson offered to help run it, and in September 2015, the first King of 94 was held in Toronto.

"We had 128 entries," Sampson said. "64 for each side on Super Nintendo and the Sega Genesis."

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Two years later, the second King of 94 was held in Las Vegas. And now, as the game approaches its 25th anniversary, McBryan and Sampson are bringing the tournament to its birthplace in Vancouver.

NHL '94 was developed at EA Canada in Burnaby, and it's not difficult to spot the Vancouver influence: the Canucks boast the fastest line in the game in the trio of Geoff Courtnall, Pavel Bure, and Cliff Ronning.

Bure's speed makes sense, of course. The Hall of Famer is one of the speediest players to ever play the game, and his stats reflect that. As for Cliff Ronning, well, he knew a guy.

"I went to school with the guy that started EA Sports," Ronning told Yahoo Sports in 2011. "We were buddies. I think he thought it'd be comical if he made me 99 out of 100."

Fittingly, the reigning King of 94 is a Vancouver resident as well.

Richmond-born Jamil Karimani had only just recently rediscovered the game. After downloading a ROM on the NHL94.com fan site, he received an email about the tournament, and decided to buy a ticket to Las Vegas to try his luck with two of his friends. He wound up winning the whole thing thanks to an overtime winner from former Quebec Nordique Valeri Kamensky.

"It was a magical OT kind of Game 7 finish with a huge celebration at the end," he said.

Karimani raved about the tournament, which boasted commentators and streamed live on Twitch, and the community, which was nothing but positive and encouraging — a rarity in the often heated gaming community.

Little wonder, then, that Karimani plans to attend the Vancouver tournament to defend his title — although he's not confident about a repeat victory.

"I think I'm good for a top 10 finish in Vancouver," he said. Anything can happen. I will be there with my 'A' game. But I'll have a big bull's-eye on my back."

"As long as somebody from Vancouver takes it home, it's great."

That's very likely, said Sampson. Karimani and his friends were three of the best players in Las Vegas, and Sampson has found, in his time among the NHL '94 fan community, that Vancouverites are often standout players — at least on a particular console.

"Literally the best players in Super Nintendo come from your own city," Sampson said, offering one more reason Vancouver was selected as the site

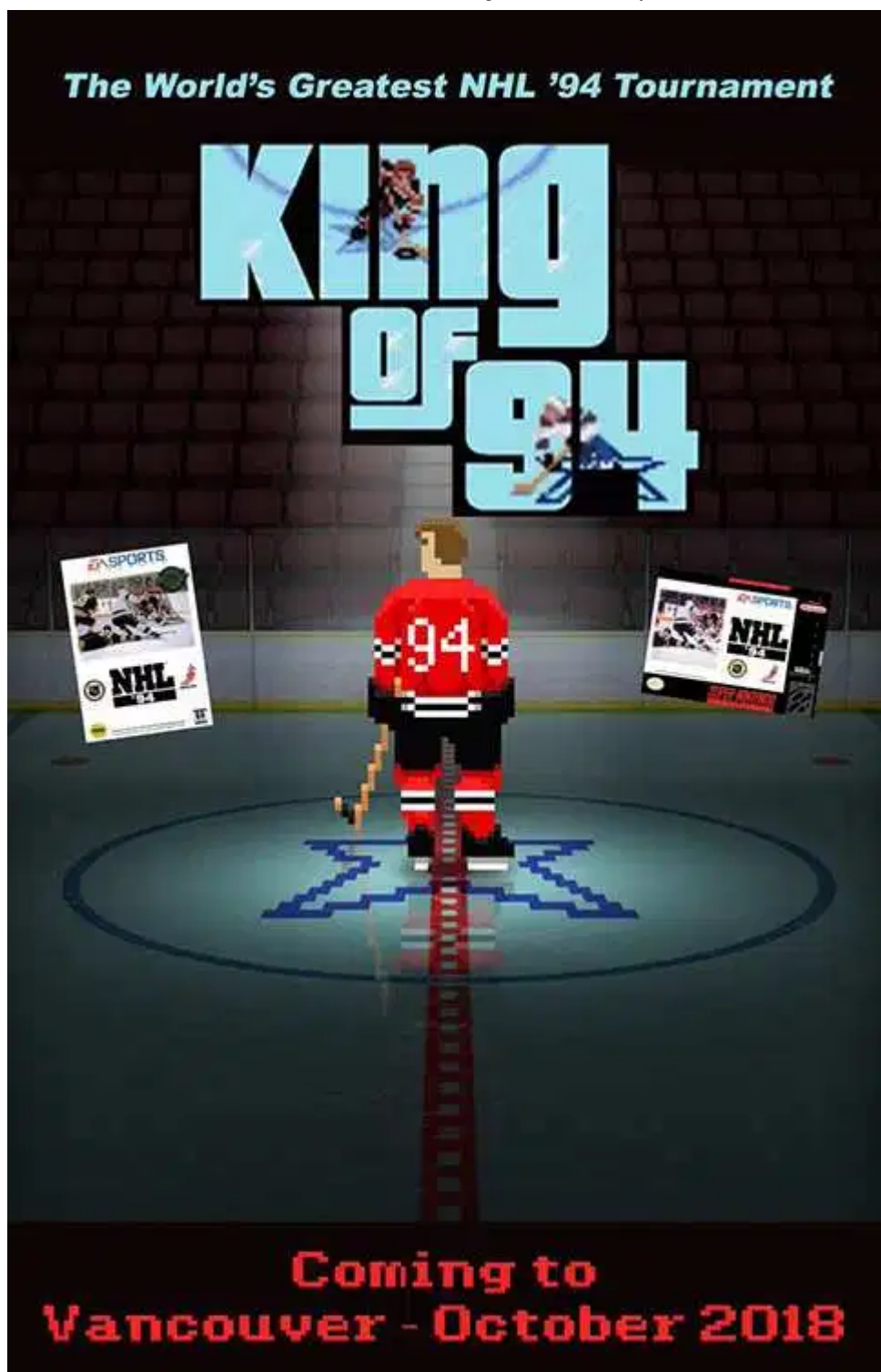
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and the gameplay has some major differences. Dedicated fans of NHL '94 have a lot to say about them, but mostly it comes down to goaltending.

“What differentiates the Super Nintendo version is the ability to control a manual goalie with a click of the button,” Karimani said. “But for Sega you have to hold down the button for two seconds before you activate it.”



King of 94. *HANDOUT / NHL94.COM*

In other words, by the time you get control of your goalie in the Sega version, the puck may already be in the net. But that particular frustration is just about the only complaint NHL '94 fans have with the game. Otherwise, they love it like no other EA release.

"It just has that lingering passion surrounding it," said Karimani. "These games turn over year on year, but NHL '94 to this day, even EA sports would admit, it had the most lingering effect, that year, that game."

What makes it so special? In part, it's the historical impact: NHL '94 was the first hockey video game to be officially licensed by both the National Hockey League and the NHL Players' Association — a landmark achievement in gaming. But that's only part of it.

"It was also the first time they had manual goalie, and the first time they introduced the one-timer into the hockey game," said Sampson. "The replay value on it is kinda timeless," Sampson added.

For many, playing the game takes them back to a time when developments as simple as a one-timer were literal game-changers. Nostalgia is a powerful drug.

Karimani pointed to the game's primitive simplicity. In the quarter-century since, the graphics have improved, as has the artificial intelligence and the complexity of the game's engine, but it's only served to underscore how invitingly simple the 25-year-old game really was.

"The new versions, the AI has a big factor," he said. "There's a lot of cheapness involved. It's not as pure and genuine."

Sampson wouldn't disclose where Vancouver's King of 94 tournament will be held just yet, saying he wants it to be a surprise. Neither could he confirm the registration cost, although he did say it will be less than the poetic \$94 the pair charged in Las Vegas.

"We're not in it to make a profit," he said. "We don't do it for that. We do it just because we love people to come out and play in these and see how competitive they are."

"People come from all walks of life. Obviously, the one thing that brings them together is that this was their favourite game growing up and it still is, 25 years later."