

# Inside the King of NHL 94 tournament



Kevin, left, took the SNES title at King of 94 III, while AJ, right, was this year's champ on Sega Genesis. Arda Ocal



Nov 9, 2018

*Note: Some names have been changed by personal request.*

RICHMOND, British Columbia -- It was a typical, late October day in this suburb of Vancouver. The temperature was getting colder but still pretty bearable (especially compared to most of the rest of the country), with a chance of rain (spoiler alert: It rained. A lot.)

In the middle of a strip mall plaza stands The Canadian Brewhouse, which is part sports bar, part homage to all things Canadian. The cutlery are shaped as golf clubs and hockey sticks. On the walls are replica Stanley Cups with the logos of NHL teams. Hundreds of bottle caps act as wallpaper. Even the highchairs are made out of used hockey sticks.

The King of NHL 94 tournament -- the third edition of the esports event, held in this suburb of Vancouver this year -- spread into the two extreme sides of the space, while the middle bar area was occupied by patrons watching NFL football and Game 5 of the World Series.

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"We seat just under 300 people, with 50-plus TVs," said Sean Stifler, the general manager who opened the Richmond location in May. This is the fourth NHL 94 tournament for the chain, which has more than 30 locations across Canada, but it was the first at the Richmond spot. "Right off the hop, [the tournament brings] triple the amount of people that we would see in here [on a typical Sunday]. It was 100 percent a good business move."

As for whether he thought the NHL 94 and Sunday football crowds would get annoyed with each other?

"I don't know if someone is going to bust out shoulder pads or hockey sticks, but I'll mediate and put on my ref uniform," he joked.

**"Thank you for joining us worldwide, wherever you may be! I'm Arda Ocal joined by Mikey McBryan and Darrell Sampson, calling all the exciting action at this year's jam-packed tournament."**

Throughout the year, NHL 94 tournaments happen at retro gaming expos across Canada and the United States. They are a popular attraction among those who love pixelated nostalgia. But the King of 94 tournament endeavors to answer the question, "Who is the greatest NHL 94 player in the world?" That vision was conceived by 35-year-old Mikey McBryan.

Living in the arctic tundra of the Northwest Territories, where the closest city with an NHL team, Edmonton, is a 16-hour drive away, one might think there isn't all that much to do. But the McBryan family turned its cargo airline, Buffalo Airways, and all the interesting characters that operate it, into a popular reality show. "Ice Pilots: NWT" aired for six seasons in Canada on the History Channel and is on Amazon Prime in the U.S. Buffalo Airways is so popular that Iron Maiden frontman Bruce Dickinson, himself a passionate pilot, often wears Buffalo Airways T-shirts.

Above all, Mikey is an NHL 94 enthusiast, to the point that he decided to make a documentary about the game. That love also gave birth to King of 94.

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"It's amazing, it's chaotic," said Mikey, who enjoys watching the tournament unfold instead of participating. "I just like being here and seeing it. It's the weirdest thing. A lot of time, money and effort goes into this. But then I see the smiles of people reliving their youth. Giving back to the community and the game that gave me so much. That's what it's about for me."

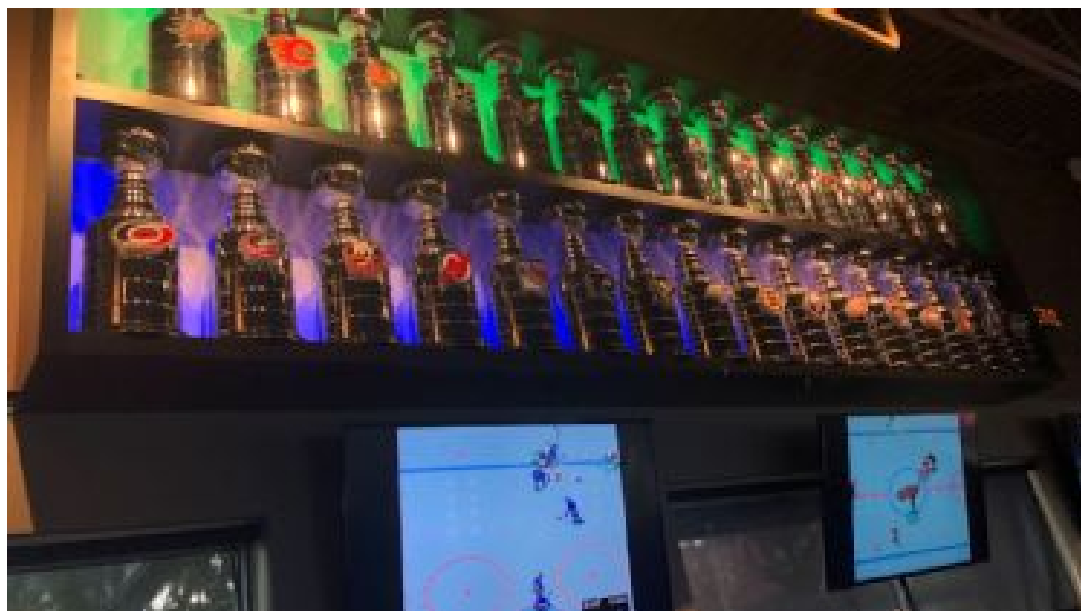
His right-hand man in putting on the tournaments is 41-year-old Darrell Sampson of Saskatoon, one of the NHL 94 community's biggest advocates. Tirelessly working, he helps put on the highest quality tournaments possible. It's almost like a full-time job on top of his *actual* full-time job helping franchise

owners get financing from the provincial government. If he wore a pedometer the day of the tournament, he likely would have reached 100,000 steps. One second he was playing in a group stage matchup, then he was off to organize the raffle for pairs of tickets the Vancouver Canucks donated, then he was making sure all sponsors get their mentions on the stream and the house mic, especially the title sponsor, Violent Gentlemen. The hockey brand donated a box of shirts, hats and long sleeves for participants.

Why does he put in all this effort? "I've been organizing tournaments for NHL 94 since I was a teenager," he said. "I'm in my element when it comes to this stuff."

Darrell and Mikey both introduced the festivities at the start of the day, including showing off the hardware the players were competing for (and the prize money, of course). Then, a surprise: a written message from the face of NHL 94, sports broadcaster Ron Barr, to mark the occasion:

"To all NHL 94 gamers. Together, you and I helped launch a new generation of sports entertainment. Kids would come up to me and say, 'you're the dude in the hockey video game.' I always wanted to be known as 'the dude in the hockey video game.' There's something wonderful and unforgettable about being part of something that was the first! Good luck in the tournament!"



The Canadian Brewhouse provided a perfect venue for the hockey-loving crowd present for the King of 94 event.  
Arda Ocal

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**"Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the SNES champ has arrived!  
The incredible, improbable story of Jammer, a drop-in from**

## **last year who dominated the field, surprised absolutely everyone and took home the Super Nintendo crown! What will he and his NHL 94 fanatic friends show us today in their hometown?"**

The bar doors opened, and in walked 35-year-old Jamil Karimani, an insurance broker and one of the many Vancouver locals who participated in the tournament. He was greeted with a cheer by the rest of the group as he began shaking hands, bumping fists and bringing it in for hugs. It was the exact opposite scene for him a year ago at this tournament.

Jamil and his childhood buddies are NHL 94 fanatics. His friend Kevin rigged the patio with special lighting so that the player controlling the home team enjoys those colors for the duration of the game. They were so passionate about the game that Kevin, who went to school for video editing, created ESPN SportsCenter-style segments including [highlights of their previous tournaments](#) and previews of their upcoming tournaments. When NHL 94 turned 20 in 2014, the crew marked the occasion with a custom NHL 94 cake.

Work and family life put play time for the group at a premium. Last year, Kevin saw a graphic on Facebook for the King of 94 II tournament in Las Vegas. He messaged the others and said, "I'm going to this. Who's coming?" They all did. Most played; some decided to save the entry fee and buy more drinks. What started as a boys' weekend ended up being an inspiration.

"Jamil winning [King of 94 II] spurred us all on to play more," Kevin said. "It actually motivated me to create my Pixel and Power website. I'm an internet marketer in real life, so I had a website made, and now I create positive, motivational content."

It was motivational for others in the area as well. Take Sandy Barr of Burnaby, British Columbia. A friend sent him an article recapping the 2017 tournament and added, "You should enter this! You whooped all of us back in the day!" Since this year's championships were local, Sandy took the chance. "This past week I was looking for my Sega [Genesis], and I couldn't find it. I called my parents, and they finally found it. I set it up, and the power cord was frayed, so I couldn't practice. Finally on Friday a buddy dropped off his cord so I could play. But I'm ready. I've been playing pretty much my entire life. But my manual goalie is a little suspect."

**"The time has come! The consoles are on, the controllers are plugged in, the cartridges are in place, the TVs are bright, and that familiar music is blaring. Now, at King of 94 III, it's time for action!"**

Ask any top NHL 94 player, and they will tell you that manual goalie control is the single biggest difference between a good player and a great player. There are tricks that we all remember from the game that get us near-guaranteed goals: the one-timer, the wrap-around, the slap shot from "the lights." But controlling the goaltender manually instead of leaving it up to the AI changes all of that.

"A bad goalie will give up a lot of goals, especially against high-end players," said Greg "AngryJay93" Cundari (whose gamer name is sometimes shortened to AJ), one of the community's long-standing members and a favorite going into the Sega Genesis tournament. "You might fail at first, but you have to keep practicing. Make the offensive player make the first move."

Another thing many of the top players will tell you is that the Genesis version is slightly better than the SNES. Although it often comes down to a point of pride or a "Shake Shack vs. In-N-Out"-style debate, there are some tangible reasons for either viewpoint. SNES fans will point to the one-button manual goalie activation and overall graphics. Sega Genesis fans will counter with the smoother game play and stat-keeping. "SNES is more reactionary," Greg said. "If you can read your opponent, you are way ahead of the curve. With Genesis, it's a more planned attack, more in-depth game play."

Vancouver, at least based on the sample of people who showed up, is a marked SNES city.

Just under 80 players entered the 2018 tournament, and almost three-quarters of them entered the SNES version (this year, players were not allowed to play both tournaments for time purposes). But other folks simply came to watch and support, including Nina, the fiancée of one of the players who was entering the tournament for the first time. He heard about it through a friend and decided it would make for a fun Sunday activity. When asked what she thought of the whole thing, she smiled and said, "it's interesting," admitting that it was the first time she had seen a live video game tournament. "You don't see many millennials here ... This is people in their 30s coming out, competing and having fun."

"[My fiancée] was very excited to come here today. He used to be a gamer, a decade ago. But he hasn't played [since then]. His buddy came over Friday night, and they practiced for about an hour."

Derek Jassmann, a plumber from nearby Langley, British Columbia, saw it as an opportunity to have a fun day with his friends with some nostalgia mixed in. "We like retro games because that's where our experience lies. It's like muscle memory. It's a good way to get out of the house on a Sunday."

Kyle Lescisin is a registered nurse, and this was his first NHL 94 tournament. "I've never done anything like this before," he said. "But I still play this game the most [of any video game] today. I think I'm gonna do OK. I'm pretty familiar. Then again, a lot of these guys might be awesome."



Long-time NHL 94 community member leiferikson checks on one of the Sega Genesis consoles used at King of 94. Arda Ocal

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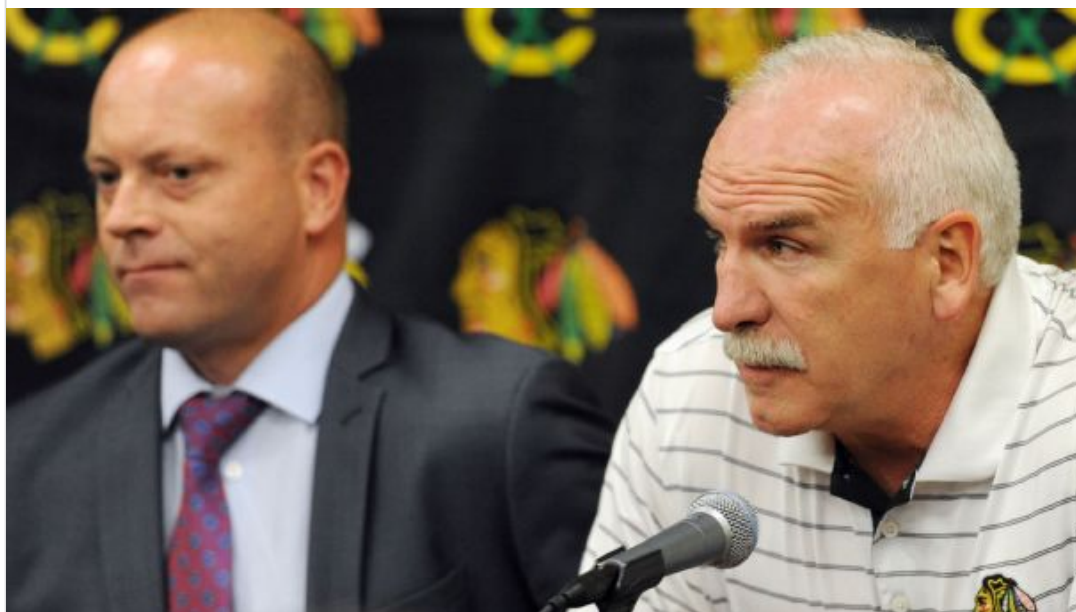
**"Coach, with Roenick ... finds the one-timer and scores!  
Make the pass, score the goal! NHL 94 and Blades of Steel  
are both proud right now!"**

One common theme among the participants was that most of them loved many video games growing up.

Except for long-time NHL 94 community member Will "Coach" McHenry.

"I hate video games," he exclaimed somewhat proudly. "But I love hockey. NHL 94 is hockey -- not a video game."

## ESPN On Ice



Emily Kaplan gives her take on the Chicago Blackhawks' firing of head coach Joel Quenneville (1:30). Kings president Luc Robitaille explains the firing of head coach John Stevens, among other topics (19:26). Emily and Greg talk about Uber-gate, the latest controversy in Ottawa (46:00). Plus, Sean McIndoe discusses his new book, "The Down Goes Brown History of the NHL" (51:25). [Listen »](#)

Coach is an athletics teacher in northern Nevada. Growing up in Atlanta in the '70s, he fell in love with hockey by watching the Atlanta Flames. When the team moved to Calgary, he switched his allegiance to the Oilers, feeling perhaps salty about the move and Edmonton being Calgary's natural team rival. But his Flames feelings quickly returned, and he jumped back to the other side of the "Uncivil War." After enduring the heartbreaks of the '80s, Coach relished in the joy of 1989, watching along with the city of Calgary as the most famous mustache in all of hockey, Lanny MacDonald, hoisted the Stanley Cup wearing red, white and yellow.

Coach is a hockey traditionalist, admiring the greats of yesteryear such as Jean Beliveau, Gordie Howe and Boom Boom Geoffrion ("He was the Atlanta Flames' first coach!"). When it's his turn to pick the teams in competitive NHL 94 play, you can count on his making it an Original Six matchup. Every time. In fact, he's such a hockey traditionalist that he initially didn't like the 1994 version of the game.

"I played NHL Hockey [in 1992] and NHLPA 93, but at the time, I didn't buy NHL 94 because fighting was removed, and I'm a violent gentleman," he said.

He decided to attend the first King of 94 tournament in 2015 in Toronto, and he developed a love for the game. But he still despises all other games.



"I can't explain it. I played Pac-Man and didn't feel like a little yellow bug. I played Tecmo Bowl and didn't feel like a football player. But I play NHL 94 and feel like a hockey player." Coach kept up his Original Six tradition in the 2018 tournament, going 2-1 with Original Six teams before bowing out in the playoffs.

## **"There it is! AJ has done it! AJ, once again, is your King of 94! For the second consecutive year, Angry Jay is in jubilation!"**

Greg "AngryJay93" Cundari, 33, is an accountant living in Sacramento, California. A Sharks fan since the team's inaugural season in 1991, he is one of the community's quieter members, despite being arguably its greatest.

"I found the forum in 2006 on a whim," he said. "One night I got home after dropping off a friend and wasn't tired, so I decided to surf the internet. I thought, 'Hey, I'll look up NHL 94. Holy cow, I see there's a message board and an online league.' From that point on, NHL 94 became a thing for me again."

The game remained among his top pastimes for the next 12 years.

"Definitely top three ... there have been years where it's No. 1. Right now [NHL 94] is No. 1. This and cycling. I like to get outdoors and ride my bike in my spandex looking like a goof. I used to play a lot of soccer growing up, but all that competitive energy got put into NHL 94. Now I don't need as many ice packs."

His most common form of practice? "I will pick the worst team in the game and play the best team in the game for all three periods with my goalie pulled. It's usually pretty close, but I can edge it out."

Greg hasn't missed a tournament and plans to keep attending yearly. Aside from King of 94, he plays in a few tournaments locally and travels to the occasional tournament, depending on who in the community will also be attending; last March, Greg and several top players competed in "Edge of 94," a tournament in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

Greg cruised through the tournament, defeating challengers new and familiar. Throughout the group stage and the best two-of-three playoff format, he lost one game (to long-time community member and Ottawa native "Smoz") en route to the finals. There, he put on a master class, taking two straight, with goals that only a player with more than 10,000 games under his belt could pull off. In one instance, he skated below the faceoff circle toward the left post and

hit a backhand such that it appeared to be floating completely parallel with the goal line across the crease until it suddenly took a sharp 90-degree turn into the back of the net. There's no way any opponent (or physics, for that matter) can explain that kind of Jedi-mind-trick type of goal, except AJ.

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Throughout the day, the returning champion found himself in a position in this venue that he had never experienced: celebrity.

"People were asking me for pictures, shaking my hand, calling me champ -- people I had never met before," Greg said. "I'm a laid-back guy, a total introvert. But I had to stay focused because there were really good players [in the tournament], and I could lose. I wish I was the underdog. People don't expect you to win."

He recently started streaming, offering tips and tricks to fellow NHL 94 enthusiasts. One of his bucket list items is to play NHL 94 at the home of the San Jose Sharks on the SAP Center Jumbotron (maybe even with "Jumbo" Joe Thornton).

The tournament winner took home \$1,000 in prize money. Although Greg doesn't have any delusions of grandeur, the now two-time champion thinks there is still room for growth in the retro gaming tournament space, especially with NHL 94.

"I would love it if [retro esports competitor] was my primary job," he said. "I'm at least going to try and stick around long enough to find out if it ever happens. I'd love to see NHL 94 be able to be played online. That would bring so many

people together. It would be a huge step for the community, the game and these tournaments."

As for future tournaments, he thinks the best competitor might not have yet discovered the game. "That person will break down the game quicker than we did. Growing up playing, we have biases. Maybe there's something I don't know. Maybe there is someone that knows something that I didn't even consider. It's scary but exciting."



Eventual champion AJ, right, pulled off some moves in the game that seemed to defy the laws of physics. Arda Ocal

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## **"Kevin is your Super Nintendo champion! He is the King of 94! This is Kevin's day, as he is congratulated by his friends and family!"**

It was a role reversal from 2017, when Jamil won, and Kevin and his friends swarmed him to celebrate. In 2018, Jamil was the first one to jump on Kevin's back after he took home the crown. "I couldn't be happier," Jamil said. "Kevin was there to support me. I'm here to support him. We've been having tournaments since 2003, and we pop champagne for the winner every time. We did it last year in Vegas, and we will do it here too."

"This is surreal. It feels fantastic," said Kevin, 36, who received a hug from his mother and sister after the victory. "This whole experience was great. Everyone was so friendly. It's a competitive game, but it's cordial. You play and shake hands".

His niece then stepped in, asking him to play and running off with his trophy. On Monday, the champ will go back to reality. "Going back to work definitely changes things for me. I don't know if anyone watched. But I told everyone about it."

**"It was an incredibly entertaining day of NHL 94 action. And we will see you next year, on the 25th anniversary of the game, for King of 94 IV!"**



The winners of the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo tournaments took home a \$1,000 prize, one of these trophies and bragging rights for the next 12 months. Arda Ocal

What's in the future for this tournament and this community?

"If we can get some good sponsors and get some solid prize money, we can make this a world-wide tournament," McBryan said. "What can we do to get people excited about this game again? On SNES especially, people came out of nowhere and win. The best player in the world might be reading this article, and we don't know them yet."

McBryan revealed after the conclusion of the finals that King of 94 IV, the 2019 edition, will take place in New York City.

"We are the second-biggest retro sports tournament in the world, behind Tecmo, and we are the young kids in town," he said. "We got a long way to go. We had 77 entries today, but we need 250 entries to be the biggest, so we're counting on the Big Apple to put butts in seats."

At the end of the day, the prize money is a minor source of motivation for these players. League of Legends or Overwatch prize pool it is not. But for the competitors, it doesn't matter. Most aren't aspiring esports players. It's about a community of people, most of them with families and jobs, who happen to be really good at a video game that came out 24 years ago and who enjoy it more than anybody else.

For some NHL 94 players, life gets in the way, and they can't swing it. For example, Raphael "kingraph" Frydman, who is considered (along with AJ) one of the two best NHL 94 players of all time, couldn't make the tournament because he was coaching his daughter's soccer tournament and had a big project at work. For some, because of the friends and the game, this is the most fun weekend of the year. Then they go back to their real lives, having made new friends, smiles elicited by pixelated hockey players on a distinct shade of blue ice with stars and numbers around their legs. When they get home, they circle next year's tournament date on their calendars, as either a fun day out or a great vacation to look forward to.