



ROCK

REIGN SUPREME

BY CAPTURING ITS 6TH NATIONAL LACROSSE LEAGUE CHAMPIONSHIP, THE TORONTO ROCK ARE BACK ON TOP AND THE FUTURE LOOKS LIKE IT WILL ONLY GET BETTER

// By Roger Lajoie | Photos: Graig Abel

There is nothing in sports that beats the feeling of winning a championship – nothing. It doesn't matter what the sport is or who the team is, to get a chance to accept a championship trophy is a special moment that you can never be sure will be repeated – even if you are a veteran lacrosse man like Toronto Rock General Manager Terry Sanderson.

So when the Toronto Rock claimed their sixth National Lacrosse League championship with a thrilling 8-7 win in the title game against the Washington Stealth at the Air Canada Centre, Sanderson was as happy as he's ever been in his long and successful career in the sport.

"It was really, really gratifying to do it this year," Sanderson says. "We were so close last year and to be able to win a championship in just our second year back with this franchise, and after being so close — it's something special. We're extremely pleased.

As Sanderson and his team have every right to be. The Rock's return to glory after years of struggling since last winning the title in 2005 actually started with the return of Sanderson to the GM's role two seasons ago. A loss in the finals to Washington was avenged this year thanks largely to his deci-



sion to bring back some of the players who were responsible for the early success of the team.

"We had to reshape the team in our image and a big part of that was bringing back some of the big pieces from the past," Sanderson explains. "Guys like Colin Doyle, Pat Merrill, Phil Sanderson, Sandy Chapman, to get them all back made a real difference.

"It's really tough to win in this league and for other teams," he adds, "it's so much fun to beat Toronto. We're the biggest name in the league and we've always had a target on our back, but guys like these know that and respond so well to that kind of pressure. These guys returning made all the difference."

Goalie Bob Watson is a constant link to the Rock's great past, and he played one of the most memorable games in this Rock career according to Sanderson.

"With all due respect to some of the other veterans, and we have a lot of them and all great players, if you go back to day one the guy that has never changed is Bobby Watson," Sanderson says. "He's the face of the Toronto Rock franchise, always has been.

And really, with all of the great games he has played, the final was probably the greatest game I've ever seen from him, especially when everybody knew this was his last game. I can't say enough about him."

The 41-year-old Watson was indeed amazing, making 47 saves to earn playoff MVP honours. He was especially spectacular in the second half, as Toronto almost squandered a 7-2 halftime lead.

But Sanderson feels the biggest difference in the two title games was that in 2011, the Rock played a more complete game, despite being out-scored 5-1 in the second half.

"The message has been delivered 100 times over that if you don't play 60 minutes you won't be successful at the end of the day," Sanderson says. "That's true especially with the parity in this league.

"This year it was a complete 60 minute effort for us, it really was despite the way the scoring went. We had a lot of crossbars and missed chances (in the second half), but we kept working hard and gave it our all for the entire game. In the long run that was the difference."

Rock owner Jamie Dawick was ecstatic after the title game, as he got to hoist the NLL Trophy in front of a great crowd of 14,488 at the Air Canada Centre as well.

"We're proud, excited and happy to be able to bring the title back to where we feel it really belongs," Dawick says. "We're really happy to see this franchise get another championship.



"When the Rock first came into the league," he adds, "they had some advantages with all of the local players that were playing here. Now it's a little tougher to win, the players are more scattered, so we're really proud of this title. It's really nice when you accomplish exactly what you set out to do. I'm still smiling over this."

Dawick feels the win will really help restore the Rock to not only the top of the competitive aspect of the league, but in stature and attendance as well.

"We're continuing on the upslope and this really helps us," Dawick says. "Winning a championship really gets us exposure and really helps get our message and awareness out there. We all know what a great game it is, but some people still don't and some drifted away for awhile there. Our goal as a franchise is to try and spread the message and we believe in the message we're spreading. It's a lot easier

to try and sell something you really believe in.

"This title really help with that, some people's first lacrosse game they were at was the championship game."

So after a hiatus of six seasons, the NLL title is back in Toronto and the Rock are once again at the top of their game, both on the floor and off of it. It's like things are back to being the way they were when the Rock was winning championship after championship and coming close to filling the ACC.

"We sure hope so," Dawick says. "We think this is just the start of the Rock returning to glory. You can never be sure of the future, but these are exciting times for the Rock, that's for sure."

And how can they not be – because nothing in sports beats winning a championship. That's true even if you are old hands at winning like the Toronto Rock are. ♦