Mitch Cyrus is a transplanted Clevelander that now calls the Carolinas his home. He's also married to a hockey fantatic and diehard Hurricanes fan, and they have been living and dying with that team over the course of the last six weeks. In his latest, Mitch takes a break from the movies and talks about the experience of following a team through a championship season, and how eager he is for that day to come with the Browns, Cavs, or Indians.

Yee-Haw.

Somehow, the picture of Lord Stanley's Cup tooling around the back roads of the land known for Andy Griffith and NASCAR doesn't seem quite right. But Raleigh, NC is not Mayberry, nor is the RBC Center to be confused with Lowe's Motor Speedway. And right now, the Cup has a one year home in this exploding metropolitan area of high tech, prestigious universities, and ever expanding dreams. Led by five veteran players with 78 seasons between them without tasting a championship and a 22 year old rookie goal tender that started the playoffs as a backup, the Carolina Hurricanes are the world champions of the NHL.

As a Browns fan and a resident of North Carolina for over 20 years, I should be torn about this. Peter Karmanos is considered the Art Model of Hartford, Connecticut. He moved the beloved Whalers out of their tiny New England home for more money and a guaranteed large home farther south, just like the Son of Satan himself. That alone should make me hate the team…but I can't. For one thing, the NHL's economics are substantially different from the NFL, and Karmonos had legitimate financial concerns with the saltbox sized arena and a team all but ignored in an area with the Bruins, Rangers, Devils, and Islanders all close by…a much different condition than existed when Model (hack, spit) walked away from sell outs and the greatest fan base in all of American sports.

I remember taking my young son to a Hurricanes/Rangers game the first year, when they had to play in Greensboro while their new stadium was being built. Five rows back, watching Wayne Gretzky intentionally accept a team penalty so that when it ended, he bounded out of the box and blew past four defenders for a goal with a speed I could not fathom even though I was right there watching it. It was pure magic, and a far cry from the previous hockey I had witnessed; the popular freak show called the East Coast Hockey League. The ECHL was goon hockey at its 'finest', where my son and I once watched a goalie take his stick and nearly castrate an unsuspecting defenseman, igniting the largest, bloodiest fight I had ever seen. WWE meets NHL.

But the arrival of the Hurricanes, plus my marriage to a hockey fanatic, changed things, and we were soon wrapped up in the Canes surprising run to the Stanley Cup Finals in 2002, where they held their own against one of the greatest teams ever purchased; the Detroit Red Wings. And then nothing; as the NHL seemed destined to destroy itself due to greed, much like MLB is doing now, minus the drugs. The lockout of the 2004-2005 season seemed to be a death-knell to the sport.

But miraculously, it all made sense. An NFL type salary cap ensured that small market teams like the Edmonton Oilers could compete with the New Yorks, Philadelphias, and Detroits of the league. Knowing the public was bored with tug and tussle hockey, the rules were amended all but outlawing hooking and holding, bringing pure speed back into the game. The violence remains, as now cross checking is a valued art, and the only way to slow down speed teams such as Carolina. Finally, the era of Goon Hockey is over, as the NHL looked at the popularity of hockey in the Olympics, with nary a fist-fight, and worked to eliminate that blemish from the game as well. (Another improvement in the game is the ability to watch it in HDTV. I think hockey is the sport most enhanced by HD, as I could clearly follow the puck at all times for the first time ever).

The results? A terrific post season capped off by one of the most exiting Game

Sevens you'll ever see. Carolina frantically attacked and attacked, refusing to surrender after their Game 6 collapse in Edmonton, relying on the emotional uplift they received by the return of Erik Cole, just three months removed from fracturing his freakin' neck! and risking his career with every second he was on the ice. Leading 2-0, they withstood a frenzied Oiler attempt at a come-back, including an unbelievable penalty kill of a 5 on 3 advantage. The game was still up for grabs with less than two minutes to play as the Oilers pulled their goalie and pounded the Carolina zone firing shot after shot at Cam Ward. A minute later, a loose puck found its way onto Eric Staal's stick, who flipped a pass to Justin Williams for the game clinching empty-netter.

For me, it was an experience I haven't had since that wild January 2003 night in Arizona when the Buckeyes stunned the world with their overtime thriller. Watching Rod Brind'Amour, Glen Wesley, Ray Whitney (an Oiler stick-boy from his youth) Brett Hedican, and Doug Weight lift the cup for the first time in their lives, in the twilight of their careers, was as emotional and satisfying as anything I've seen in all my years following sports.

This was the first professional championship won by "my team" that I've ever witnessed, as I was too young to even know who the Browns were in 1964. I don't feel this is a betrayal of my Cleveland roots, as there has never been an NHL team there…and the expansion Columbus Blue Jackets just don't have an emotional connection to an Ohio expat like me. It's not as satisfying as what it will be when LeBron lifts his first NBA Championship Trophy, and especially won't be as great as when Randy Lerner hoists the Lombardi Trophy…or even when I'm 130 years old and the Indians finally win a World Series.

It's not as good as any of those three will be…but for now, it's pretty damn nice.