

A DISCUSSION WITH KINGS HEAD EQUIPMENT MANAGER DARREN GRANGER

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 December 22, 2014

The management, the coaches, the players: those who are at the forefront when teams win championships – and rightfully so. But there is always more to the equation. The training staff play a significant role, as do the scouts and those in player development. But there is one special aspect to a team's success that, while overlooked at times, plays a role just as vital.

To explain how important equipment is to a player may be as glaring as pointing out the equipment itself, but Darren Granger's role is by no means a routine one.

To be an equipment manager, one would have to constantly be on their toes, think quick while making fast, efficient progress to replace the broken strap of a pad, finding the right piece to tighten the screw on a helmet or finding a stick of the proper weight and size – all while making sure a player doesn't miss a shift or delaying the game.

As Head Equipment Manager of the Stanley Cup champion Los Angeles Kings, Darren Granger knows what this means all too well having been an equipment manager for over 25 years – 22 of those in the National Hockey League. A veteran of over 1,500 NHL games, Granger has seen it all. He's been with players through the lowest and highest of morale, and for the last nine years, he has shared his vast expertise with the Kings.

Having helped win two Stanley Cups in Los Angeles and an Olympic gold medal for Canada in Sochi, Darren Granger is not only one of the most successful equipment men around but he is a decorated one at that.

Mr. Granger was kind enough to take some time out of his busy schedule to speak with yours truly.

RC: This is your ninth season with the Los Angeles Kings. Like GM Dean Lombardi and (Goaltending Coach) Bill Ranford, you joined the organization at the very beginning of their rebuilding plan. Spending so much time in the locker room and around the players, how has the atmosphere changed over the years? I can imagine, for instance, that in the early years that morale wasn't quite so high with all the losing.

DG: When Dean took over the team, he made a number of changes to the team and had a vision of how it was going to operate going forward. We had a few bumps along the way early on but he wanted everyone to have a big part of building towards a championship team. We have had a great few years here and we continue to build toward winning more championships for this team.

RC: Could you describe a day in the life of the Head Equipment Manager?

DG: The nice part about my job is every day is something different. I have a great staff around me and they make my job much easier. I have two full-time assistants as well as three part-time guys that mostly work gamedays. Gameday for us typically starts around 7:30am and ends about 11:30pm. All of our practices happen at our training center in El Segundo. This is home base for us. We have two sets of everything: one at Staples Center and one at Toyota Sports Center. The only things moved back and forth for home games are skates, goalies and sticks. We are very fortunate to have two great facilities to work out of. I travel with the team at all times as does my assistant Dana Bryson. My other assistant, Joe Alexander, travels part time. On practice days you will find me in my office placing orders, approving invoices and all the paperwork and emails that come with my job. Then usually behind a skate sharpener and in the equipment room to get all the skates and everything ready for the next day.

RC: In regards to the current roster, are there any players who play better with tweaks to their equipment (i.e. tighter gloves, more tape on their sticks) and if so, could you give us some examples?

DG: All the players at this level are really in tune with their equipment. Most of the adjustments and customization are done to their sticks and skates. These are their tools of the trade. When they tell me something doesn't feel right, I believe them. Some players are more finicky with their equipment than others. We are constantly tweaking and helping the guys to be at their best and to have what they need.

RC: Before joining the Kings, you were the Assistant Equipment Manager for the Vancouver Canucks for 13 seasons. Being that it was your first job at the NHL level, how was that experience overall? From management to coaches to players, do you keep in touch with anyone from the organization?

DG: I have been very fortunate to work for two great organizations. I can't say enough about the Canucks and the city of Vancouver. It is a great organization and one that I owe a lot to for getting me my start in the NHL. We loved living in Vancouver, our kids were born there and we still have a lot of friends there. I keep in touch with the training staff. We are still close, especially Head Equipment Manager Pat O'Neill who taught me a lot about this profession and is a big reason I am where I am today. I am also very happy to see Trevor Linden back with the team. He is a great man and I am glad he is back where he should be: with the Canucks.

RC: This past February, you were given the enviable honor of representing your country in Sochi. While you have represented Canada before, this was the first time you had done so at the Olympics. Explain how special it was not only to win gold but to be at the Games dressed in your country's colors.

DG: It is very special and a huge honor to be asked to work for this team. This is not a position that you apply for, so to be asked by (Team Canada GM) Steve (Yzerman) to be a part of it is quite an honor. I have always enjoyed my time with Hockey Canada and I am so proud of the players and staff of this team. We had a great bunch of guys.

RC: Aside from your position with the Kings, have you taken on any other roles – as a mentor, for example – with the players or coaching staff?

DG: Well, I am not sure about mentor but I think a big part of my job is to be there for everyone and be a good positive teammate. We are a family. It is not uncommon to have someone in my office talking hockey or personal things. I would do anything for anyone in our room and I know they would do the same for me.

RC: In 2004, you received the Larry Ashley Award from the British Columbia Hall of Fame. How did that feel not only personally but professionally?

DG: This is something I am very proud of as well. First to be recognized by the BC Hall of Fame is an honor. I worked with Larry Ashley for my first few years in Vancouver. He was our Head Athletic Trainer. I know what type of person he was and how well he did his job so to be recognized with an award in his name, I am truly honored.

RC: What stories can you share from any of the past or current Kings about equipment malfunctions? Anything funny or downright unbelievable?

DG: Well, hopefully in my position there are not too many malfunctions that can't be solved quickly. That is a big part of what I do. Being prepared and thinking on your feet quickly so that is something comes up during a game or practice, we can deal with it without any issues of players having to leave games or missing shifts. After our first Stanley Cup in 2012 and we got the equipment back from the ice crew after the celebration, we got everything back except Justin Williams' right glove. We have a photo in our room now of Justin leaving the bench and his glove is about 10 rows deep behind our bench going to the seats. I have no idea where that glove is now!

RC: You are a native of Brandon, Manitoba. When you spent your first winter in the Los Angeles area, how did you feel coming from such a cold, wintry climate. Was it a transition celebrating the holidays without snow?

DG: Our first year in LA we attended a Christmas service on the Manhattan Beach Pier. That was something! We have had quite a few nice winters while in Vancouver and now LA so we are pretty fair weather now. I miss a lot about Manitoba, but the cold and winter isn't one of them. I am pretty fortunate in that regard.

Imagine Jonathan Quick trying to make one of his spectacular saves with a loose pad or Anze Kopitar wristing a shot without cutting his bare hands in the process. Could you comprehend Drew Doughty firing a point shot with a broken stick or Matt Greene blocking a shot with a defective shin pad? Neither could I. Of course, neither could Darren Granger or any of his staff. But if you could imagine any of this, then you cannot possibly fathom the Los Angeles Kings squad without Mr. Granger and, in turn, a Los Angeles Kings squad without success.

The skills and talent are needed, as well as the work ethic, creativity and uncanny timing. These tools, however, are nonexistent without the equipment. Just take a trip to Toronto's Hockey Hall of Fame and you'll just how many gloves, sticks, skates and helmets are on display. Let's face it: If hockey's Holiest shrine can recognize the importance of equipment and furthermore, the equipment staff, then so can everyone else involved in the game.

Darren Granger has taken equipment maintenance and transformed it into an art form. Okay, there is a bit of bias in the latter statement but that doesn't mean that it isn't accurate. One can credit the success of individual players to their countless abilities from finding the open the man to sacrificing their bodies to block an otherwise-glorious shot. But to overlook the significance of a player's equipment is something that cannot be done for it is virtually impossible. For that, Darren Granger and his staff are just as much to thank for the success of the Los Angeles Kings as Darryl Sutter, Dean Lombardi and the aforementioned Jonathan Quick.

So, the next time you see the Stanley Cup, be sure to find Darren Granger's name on it and take a moment, for imagine the Kings' fate without Mr. Granger and his contributions makes me shudder. Easily. There are no two ways about it.