

A TALK WITH KINGS' INAUGURAL GOAL-SCORER, HALL-OF-FAMER BRIAN KILREA

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 December 26, 2014

DISCLAIMER: This interview was conducted two days before the tragedy in Ottawa that took the life of Nathan Cirillo. MakeWayfortheKings would like to send along our deepest sympathies to everyone affected by last week's tragic events.

A little over a week ago, I had the honour of speaking with Hockey Hall-of-Famer Brian Kilrea. While he is best known for his work with the Ottawa 67's of the Ontario Hockey League, he is also part of Los Angeles Kings history.

The date was October 14, 1967, the venue was the old LA Sports Arena. The newly-christened Los Angeles Kings made their NHL debut against one of their expansion cousins, the Philadelphia Flyers. Fans in attendance watching the newborn Kings witnessed the first-ever goal scored by the team – off the stick of Brian Kilrea, who briefly reminisced about the goal.

"Teddy Irvine passed the puck out of the corner, I shot the puck quick and it found the back of the net," Kilrea said. "After the game, I gave the puck to (then-Kings owner) Jack Kent Cooke."

But while Kilrea will always be remembered by the Kings and their fans as the team's inaugural goal-scorer, he is most notorious for what he has contributed to his hometown of Ottawa.

For four decades, Brian Kilrea was the face of the Ottawa 67's, serving as the team's head coach for a total of 32 seasons. Despite a two-year stint as an assistant coach with the New York Islanders in the mid-1980's and a brief retirement in 1994, Kilrea's name is far-and-away most synonymous with the 67's, and, for that matter, hockey in Canada's capital. Sorry, Senators.

Brian Kilrea's coaching career in Ottawa spanned what seems like a lifetime, which most recently included a brief return to the bench on October 17, four days before his 80th birthday. The return officially made Kilrea the oldest coach in hockey history as his 67's defeated the Mississauga Steelheads by a score of 6-3. On a side note, in said game, Kilrea coached Kings' 2014 draft pick Alex Lintuniemi.

En route to becoming the most successful coach in hockey history – with a resume that includes 2157 games, 1194 wins, two OHL titles and two Memorial Cups – Kilrea coached a plethora of future NHL stars, including a handful of future Los Angeles Kings. Two of those future Kings are current members of the team's family: Tyler Toffoli and TV analyst/Kings legend Jim Fox.

Before making the jump to the NHL with the Kings in 1980, Jim Fox spent three seasons under Kilrea with the 67's. There, Fox enjoyed tremendous success, scoring 146 goals and 220 assists for 366 points. That includes a 65-goal, 101-assist output in his final season of junior, 1979-80. A couple of weeks ago, I asked Jim Fox how it was playing for Brian Kilrea.

"I feel fortunate to have played for Brian Kilrea because he always worked as hard as he could to put his players in the best possible position to have success," Fox told me. "He also loved the creative part of the game and he encouraged his players to be as creative as possible. He always put a premium on being disciplined as a teammate, but he also found enough "room" to allow us to have fun. I loved playing for Brian!"

Fox then recently told me via Twitter (@JimFox19) that *"Brian CARED about his players!"* He also said that he could not have asked for a more generous coach than Kilrea.

During my discussion with Kilrea, I asked the Hall-of-Famer how he enjoyed coaching Fox.

"It was a pressure to coach Jimmy Fox," Kilrea said without hesitation. "He was drafted by Windsor but I traded for him to Ottawa. It was one of best trades made by the Ottawa 67's. He went on to win scoring titles before being drafted by the LA Kings. He made the all-time team as the best right-winger for the 67's."

While it was only for his final season behind the 67's bench, Brian Kilrea spent the 2008-09 campaign coaching current Kings forward Tyler Toffoli. The legendary coach gave his thoughts on the youngster.

"Tyler Toffoli was our first-round pick for the 67's and found time to score 50-plus twice," Kilrea told me. "He joined our club and had a national league shot and quick release. He will be one of your top scorers for years to come."

I also asked Kilrea what role he plays with the 67's now.

"I am presently listed as team advisor but I just consider myself a scout," he responded. "I enjoyed my last year as coach five years ago and I was lucky to have great players for so many years."

When it comes right down to it, there are fewer successful and more humble people than Brian Kilrea.

Attending high school in Ottawa just down the road from where the Hall-of-Famer lived, we would walk past each other a few times and he would smile and say hello each and every time – and many of those encounters occurred in the dead of winter when the Ottawa days could not have looked or felt any more miserable, which serves as a testament to just how great the Hall-of-Famer was and is in person. After all, Brian Kilrea was anything but miserable, and that comes as no surprise to those who know him well.

The list of future NHLers who played under Kilrea is seemingly endless. From the current ones such as Toffoli and Logan Couture, the veterans like Gary Roberts and Mike Peca, the former Kings from Warren Rychel and Alyn McCauley, coaches like Terry Murray, GMs like Doug Wilson and Hall-of-Famers like Denis Potvin, Brian Kilrea has coached a wide range of talent and made the most of their abilities, having just six losing seasons to his record in his 40 years behind the bench. That is a feat that will arguably never come close to being contested with, much less matched.

Aside from his induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 2003, I asked Brian Kilrea what his proudest moment was, and he told that it was coaching in the 1999 Memorial Cup Final.

It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon in Ottawa. The date was May 23, 1999 and my brother and I attended, not knowing we'd be witnessing one of the greatest championship games ever.

The 67's defeated the WHL's Calgary Hitmen 7-6 in an overtime thriller on a goal scored by (1997 Los Angeles first-round draft pick) Matt Zultek. The Ottawa Civic Centre erupted as Brian Kilrea hoisted his first MemCup in 15 years.

To have that – in addition to the rest of his long list of accomplishments – happen to a better coach, heck, a better man, is next to impossible.

Brian Kilrea: the man, the coach, the legend, the legacy. And what a legacy he has left.

Thank you, Killer.