

PADDLES DOWN: TALKING WITH KINGS GOALTENDING COACH BILL RANFORD

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A few years ago, I was visiting my father for the holidays when he asked me to go through all of my hockey books I have had since childhood – and believe me, there were plenty of them. One of those books featured a quote from a Stanley Cup-winning (and Conn Smythe-winning) netminder who said – and I’m paraphrasing – that having a good game, then a bad game is something that no goaltender can do in the playoffs. The quote was simple, yet accurate. Those words resonated with me in later years when Patrick Roy and Martin Brodeur lifted Lord Stanley’s mug over their heads, just to name two examples. Most recently, though, I was reminded of the quote in 2012 when Jonathan Quick had a postseason so dominant (16-4, 1.41 GAA, .946 save percentage) that only the late, great Terry Sawchuk came to mind. Not Jacques Plante, not Bernie Parent, not even Ken Dryden put up such numbers. If there ever was a unanimous choice for the Most Valuable Player of the NHL playoffs, that distinction belonged to Jonathan Quick in 2012. But the native of Milford, Connecticut, did not achieve Stanley Cup success by himself.

The quote was said by a man who happened to be Jonathan Quick’s goaltending coach in 2012. Before that, he led the Edmonton Oilers to their only Stanley Cup victory in the post-Wayne Gretzky era. That man’s name was Bill Ranford who, after winning a pair of Stanley Cups over the course of a 15-year playing career in the NHL, went on to win two more Cups with the Los Angeles Kings in said capacity.

When he was hired by the Kings in 2006, Ranford joined a team whose goaltending situation was, for all intents and purposes, a laughing stock. Of course, in all fairness, the team didn’t have much to write home about in the other facets of their game. Nevertheless, Ranford’s influence in Los Angeles has helped transformed the once hard-luck Kings into one of the premier clubs in the entire National Hockey League.

For a team notorious for employing castaways between the pipes, the Kings, under the guidance of general manager Dean Lombardi and an outstanding scouting staff, began to draft effectively. In just a few years, the Kings were stacked with unprecedented depth in goal. From Quick and Jonathan Bernier to Martin Jones and Jean-Francois Berube, Los Angeles was suddenly the hot spot for netminders – and it was up to Bill Ranford to help hone the skills of said talent, molding them into bona fide NHL netminders.

I had the opportunity to speak to Mr. Ranford about the Kings’ current status in goal and how far the organization has come at said position since his arrival in 2006. We even discussed some personal matters and flashed back to 1990, the aforementioned playoff year Ranford won the Conn Smythe while leading the Oilers to an unexpected – not to mention memorable – championship run.

RC: You were hired as the Kings' goaltending coach in July, 2006. At that time, the Kings were one of the worst teams in hockey in goal. Newly-drafted Jonathan Bernier was still a few years away from being an NHL netminder and until then, the team went through a carousel of goaltenders. Describe the progression of Los Angeles's strength at said position from the time you arrived to 2010 and even today.

BR: We focused on setting up a system that would help improve our goaltending, our focus was attention to detail and work ethic. We also realized the importance of rebound control, which was an issue early on with young defense and the number of goalies we had. We realized as an organization that we had to figure out which goalies we were going to move forward with and build from there. With my other goalie coach Kim Dillabaugh (goaltending development), we put a system in place and tried and make us better. This has allowed us to develop the likes of Quick, Bernier, (Erik) Ersberg, Jones and Berube.

RC: Even though Jonathan Quick has a long-term contract, there is no shortage of talent in the Kings organization when it comes to netminders . That was proven last season as Martin Jones and even Ben Scrivens showed just how valuable they were, and how good the Kings could be without Quick, who was injured for nearly two months. How do you like Martin Jones as a goaltender overall? How has he changed from last season and even since the Kings first signed him?

BR: It is important to develop your goalies within your system in the new cap era. If your #1 guy goes down, you have to have someone ready to take their place on a short-term basis. Scrivens and Jones were able to do that for our team last year. Jones has become a very good NHL goaltender in a short time. He was a big part of our team making the playoffs with his success when Quick was hurt last season. He has matured as a goalie and adapted his style to the NHL game.

RC: While you won your first Stanley Cup as a player in 1988, it was as a backup to Grant Fuhr in Edmonton. Do you use this experience to encourage Martin Jones when and if he gets frustrated sitting on the bench for games at a time?

BR: The experience I had as a backup in 1988 has definitely helped me dealing with the #2 guy in our playoff runs in the last three years. It is important to have the #2 guy ready to play if he is needed. Rest and readiness is the fine line that you have to deal with when the #2 goalie is not playing over a long stretch of days.

RC: What can you tell us about the respective progressions of Jean-Francois Berube and Patrik Bartosak? While the latter is still new to the organization, Berube has climbed the ranks through the ECHL with Ontario and now in the AHL with Manchester. Where do you see him fitting in with the Kings in the next few years?

BR: Berube has followed our system in grooming a goalie for the NHL. He is no different than Quick, time in the ECHL, then a #2 at the AHL level and then learning to be a starter at the AHL level. Berube has shown us that he is ready for the next step if needed. Bartosak is obviously in his first year as a pro and he is learning what it takes to be a pro, on and off the ice. We are excited about him, he has a lot of raw talent. We are working on cleaning up some parts of his game to make him more consistent at the AHL level.

RC: How has it been working with Jonathan Quick? Can you describe his personality, playing style and work ethic now compared to when he first came onto the scene in 2008?

BR: Quick is an intelligent guy, great hockey sense. He has worked on his game to get better and continually looking for areas to improve on. He is a quiet guy but also a leader in our room through his play. He plays a hybrid style of stand-up and butterfly but with an athletic component to his game. The difference in his game today from when he started is less athletic and more technical. He is in more control of what happens during the game.

RC: Back on the topic of winning Stanley Cups as a player, you won your second in 1990, which may have very well been a more special win for the Edmonton Oilers and their fans. Two years removed from trading Wayne Gretzky to the Kings and just one year removed from getting eliminated by them in the opening round, you were thrown into the fire, so to speak. Grant Fuhr was injured and especially after a 3-1 series deficit against Winnipeg in the opening round, you and your team weren't given much of a chance. Yet, you persevered, losing just three combined games in the final three rounds including sweeping Gretzky and the Kings in the second round. With veterans like (Mark) Messier and (Jari) Kurri to role players like Adam Graves and Mark Lamb, you won the Stanley Cup while taking home the Conn Smythe as playoff MVP.

Describe the overall feeling of that spring. How did you feel entering the playoffs, coming back against Winnipeg and ultimately shutting down the Bruins, your former team, in the Final? How about that long overtime game in Game 2 of the Final and in the process, bearing the heat in the sweltering Boston Garden?

BR: Obviously the Winnipeg series was a real learning experience for me. You realize the ups and downs that can go on in a series. Experience goes a long way in the playoffs which gave us an edge over Winnipeg in that area. Once we got rolling, we couldn't be stopped. The Bruins series was special because they drafted me out of junior hockey and then traded me away to Edmonton. The long overtime game took a lot of energy out of everyone. We were battling the flu as a team and were fortunate to have an extra day off in between games for some of our guys to recover. By that point, we were a team that was determined to win a fifth Stanley Cup.

RC: One of my favourite movies is the 2004 film, *Miracle*. Watching Jim Craig play goal reminded me of your distinguishable stand-up style. Later on, I realized that Craig's on-ice performance was, in fact, portrayed by you and not actor Eddie Cahill, who portrayed Craig's off-ice character. How was that experience?

BR: The Miracle experience was fun. It gave me an opportunity to be in a movie that will be around for a long time. The fact that I was a stand-up style goalie like Jim Craig made it fun for me to do. I was asked to be involved early on in the movie but was not able to make the commitment. They finally convinced me to come in during the last six weeks of shooting to do all the Jim Craig on-ice shots. It was long days but the end product made it worth it.

RC: Finally, as per tradition, CBC's *Hockey Night in Canada* closes their playoff telecast by having each member of the Stanley Cup-winning team announce who their favourite player was growing up. This spring and in 2012, you said that your favourite player growing up was Hall-of-Fame netminder Ken Dryden. How much of an impact did Dryden's game have on your career both as a player and a coach? Does Mr. Dryden know how you feel?

BR: Ken Dryden was my idol growing up. It impressed me that he was able to get an education and play in the NHL. Both of these things were important to me as I was growing up. He was stand-up style goalie that had a lot of success in Montreal, so I had a chance to watch Montreal a lot as a kid on HNIC. I have only met Ken Dryden once and that was by chance, ran into him getting out of an elevator in our hotel one night in Montreal. To answer your question, no he doesn't know how I feel unless he saw the piece on TV.

In the late evening of April 10, 1990, the old Winnipeg Arena erupted as defenseman Dave Ellett's point shot gave the Jets a double-overtime win to put them up 3-1 in their opening-round series against Ranford and the Oilers. Little did anyone know that, following said loss, Bill Ranford had his coming-out party, so to speak. While, sadly for fans in Winnipeg, that victory would turn out to be the high watermark of their Jets' success, the 23-year-old Ranford would go on to post a 2.53 goals-against average and a .912 save percentage en route to winning Lord Stanley's Cup.

During a 15-year playing career that saw him post 240 wins and 15 shutouts, Bill Ranford jumped onto the NHL scene at a time when his stand-up style wasn't the in-thing for NHL netminders. The butterfly styles of the smaller goalies like the Moogs, Vernons and Vanbiesbroucks were front-and-center while Ranford's upright, lanky stance was more obscure. Although his height (5' 11 according to hockeydb.com) would be considered small by today's goaltending standards, it was considered big during Ranford's early playing career when the average height of NHL goaltenders hovered around 5' 8. In fact, Ranford's success in goal

branched out to the international stage where, in 1991, he led Team Canada to their third-straight Canada Cup. He again excelled for his native country in 1994, winning gold at the World Hockey Championships, leading Canada to victory with some help from the championship-winning scorer – perhaps you know him – Luc Robitaille.

Growing up, watching Bill Ranford was a throwback to watching video of his idol Ken Dryden dominate the crease for the famed Montreal Canadiens during the 1970's. His career numbers may seem modest to some but after what he has helped accomplish in Los Angeles, it is no secret that Bill Ranford's hockey contributions and expertise are anything but.

Whether or not it was a coincidence to have someone named "Quick" become the goaltender long-suffering Kings have been dreaming of, it is certainly no coincidence that he would not be the netminder he is today if it wasn't for Ranford's tutelage.

When teams talk about winning one championship, that's talent. When teams talking about winning more, that's discipline. But when teams do, in fact, win multiple championships, that is a combination of everything that defines success.

That spring of 1990, Bill Ranford earned himself and his team a spot in the Stanley Cup Final against the netminder he was traded to Edmonton for: Andy Moog. But while Moog certainly had a great career with the Bruins, especially in 1989-90, Ranford did him one better. He may not have expressed any hard feelings towards the team that drafted him but to a man, very few things can equal the pleasure of beating the team that traded you away, especially on the game's grandest stage for the oldest, most recognizable team prize in professional sports on this continent – and possibly even the planet.

From ownership to upper management to the players, to the coaching and training staff, no role is more or less important than the next – and the Los Angeles Kings are living proof of that. Their two Stanley Cups in three years – a feat many said was next-to-impossible in today's salary-cap era – would be nonexistent if it were not for the contributions of Bill Ranford, who has made his mark on this great game and this great franchise so much that in five, 10 and even 25 years from now, we will look back on the rags-to-riches story of the Los Angeles Kings and immediately be reminded of how one of the worst goaltending units slowly but surely transformed into the best. That is a feat very few teams from any era can boast about.

With the invaluable assistance of Kim Dillabaugh, Bill Ranford has taken his experience and his expertise and helped put Los Angeles on the map as a city few, if any, NHL teams want to visit – and for those wondering, Anaheim is a separate city, therefore doesn't count as a part of Los Angeles.

Take a couple of Conn Smythes, add a handful of rings and throw in a plethora of success that fans would not have dared dreamed of eight years earlier, and you get the Los Angeles Kings.

Thanks to Bill Ranford, this is the ultimate for the Los Angeles Kings. But, also thanks to Bill Ranford, this is just the beginning.