

# BLEAK START BUT PROMISING FINISH AS LA KINGS CLOSE OUT 2015 WITH PLENTY OF OPTIMISM

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 December 31, 2015



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“Adversity introduces a man to himself.”

Albert Einstein’s famous quote could not be more relevant to the **Los Angeles Kings** than it was in 2015.

The last time the Kings missed the playoffs, the collective attitude was different; much more optimistic. When the players cleaned out their lockers in the spring of 2009, there was a palpable feeling of hope, of confidence, that the Kings would not only be in the playoffs the following year but that they would do some damage along the way. Despite bowing out in the opening round in 2010 and 2011, the Kings would go on to win two **Stanley Cups** in three years as they entered the 2014-15 campaign with the highest of hopes.

Unfortunately, it wasn’t to be.

The Kings struggled on the ice all the while dealing with the **off-ice drama** involving **Slava Voynov**, **Mike Richards** and later, **Jarret Stoll**. In the end, the Kings wound up becoming just the fourth defending Stanley Cup champions in the expansion era to miss the playoffs the following year. A dubious distinction, perhaps, but to give credit where it’s due, the unexpected resurgence of the **Calgary Flames** certainly did not help the cause for the silver-and-black. Nonetheless, it was a playoff miss and thus, the 2014-15 campaign was deemed a failure.

Failure, though, a term so guttural, should not — and cannot — define the Los Angeles Kings of 2015.

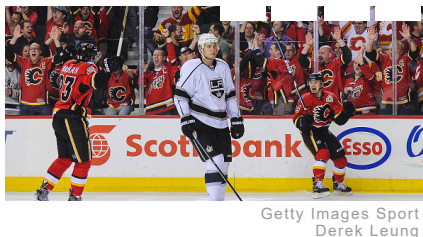
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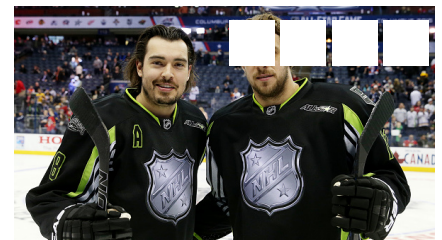


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As humans, we go through losing on a fairly regular basis. Most losses may be minor but there are those that are simply incomprehensible. Fortunately, unlike the Kings, we don't have our losses magnified on a national, or even a regional, stage. Following their playoff miss, the Kings were dissected into, for lack of a better term, pretenders by the same so-called experts who claim that they were in bed by 10pm EST. As a result, they easily overlooked an **Anze Kopitar** highlight-reel goal, a crucial defensive play by **Drew Doughty** or a miraculous save by **Jonathan Quick**. Yet, when the proverbial crap hits the fan, these "experts" are among the first to jump on the anti-L.A. bandwagon.

The drama involving Mike Richards and **Dean Lombardi's** reaction to his protege's ways was certainly shocking, but it still took a back seat to the Slava Voynov matter. The issue divided countless Kings fans, some of whom ignored his behaviour simply because he was too talented of a defenseman to be punished. What the Kings went through in 2015 in the public eye was akin to the infamy that was the **NBA's Portland Trail Blazers** or the **NFL's Cincinnati Bengals**. Yet, among the many lessons my father taught me, one that always stand out is that making a mistake isn't as important as learning from it, and the Los Angeles Kings have appeared to have learned from theirs.

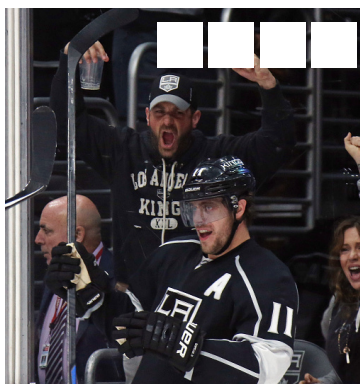
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Voynov, Richards and Stoll have all moved on and so have the Kings. In fact, the silver-and-black are off to one of their greatest starts in franchise history. This season, they reached 40 points in 29 games and 20 wins in 31 games — both second-fastest in team history. What makes Los Angeles's start even better, though, is that their success thus far has been a team effort in every sense of the term.

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Through 36 games, 10 different Kings have reached double-digits in points thus far with nine hitting double-digits in assists. **Alec Martinez** and **Jake Muzzin**, who were once deemed defensive liabilities, have turned themselves into blueline stalwarts, blocking shots and sweeping away sure-goals more times than yours truly can recall. Milan Lucic, who many fans were reluctant about at first, has won the fanbase over in his maiden season in L.A. by scoring 10 goals and 12 assists but, just as importantly, dishing out 128 hits as of Dec. 30. Even after leading-scorer Jeff Carter got injured, the Kings began to increase their goal production — 10 goals in the first two games minus No. 77. Best of all, the consensus involving

Anze Kopitar and a new contract are very positive as a new long-term deal should be signed soon.

While last spring was certainly disappointing for the big club, the same cannot be said for the Kings' minor-league affiliates. In what was the final season for both the **Manchester Monarchs** and the **Ontario Reign** in their respective leagues, they did not go out quietly. The Reign marched to the **ECHL Conference Finals**, falling short of the **Kelly Cup Final**. The Monarchs, though, did one better.

Coming off their first regular-season title in team history, the Monarchs showed that their success was no fluke, **winning their first-ever AHL Calder Cup** thanks in large part to the contributions of now-current Kings, **Jordan Weal** and **Michael Mersch**. It may not have been a Stanley Cup win but this was the next best thing for longing Kings fans.

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This season, unfortunately, did not get off to an auspicious start for the silver-and-black. After losing **Dwight King** to a broken foot in the preseason, the Kings not only lost their first three games but did so while being outscored 12-2. Suggestions to fire head coach **Darryl Sutter**, GM **Dean Lombardi** and even trading **Jonathan Quick** ran rampant among fans. It seemed as though the Kings weren't good enough to contend again as their dismal start only added fuel to the fire for the skeptics.

But then...

The Kings clicked, reeling off seven-straight wins and later six-straight wins and a nine-game point streak before entering **Calgary** on New Year's Eve having won three-in-a-row. Thrilling overtime wins have rejuvenated the excitement in Los Angeles while a fairly-consistent solid team effort has helped not only restore but maintain a winning attitude in the City of Angels.

There have been some underwhelming performances here and there so far but overall, the Kings, who celebrate a nine-point lead in the **Pacific Division** entering the final day of 2015, have proven to the rest of the league that they are a force to be reckoned with.

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From late rallies and sound defense, from clutch scoring to timely goaltending, the Los Angeles Kings are having a banner year thus far; but the battle is far from over and anything can, and will, happen.

Entering 2016, it is up to the Kings not to get complacent but to remain hungry, to play each game as if they are out to prove someone wrong. That is the lifeblood of any athlete, any team, any human being. After all, if the former half of 2015 has taught them anything, then the Kings know that they cannot put themselves in such a predicament again.

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With their playoff miss last April, many have written off the Los Angeles Kings. That shouldn't deter the silver-and-black, and it hasn't. Instead, said dismissal has only paved the way for a story too good for even the most creative of scriptwriters to conceive. If fans thought 2012 and 2014 were incredible journeys, they should just close their eyes and imagine what 2016 will bring for their Los Angeles Kings.

It is far more real than even the greatest of skeptics would think.