

LA KINGS NELSON EMERSON ON JORDAN WEAL'S DEVELOPMENT: "HE'S DONE EVERYTHING THAT WE'VE ASKED"

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When the **Los Angeles Kings** missed the playoffs in 2009, there was very little worry, next to no frustration. Yes, it had been a playoff miss for the seventh-straight year for Kings but unlike in previous years, there was a ray of light shining through. **Drew Doughty** had wrapped up a phenomenal rookie campaign, **Jonathan Quick** had made a solid case to be the team's new number-one netminder while **Anze Kopitar**

and **Dustin Brown** continued to establish themselves as franchise cornerstones. In 2015, however, the Kings' playoff miss manifested itself into a collective feeling of discouragement. Never mind the team's championship win just the previous spring and in 2012 or that general manager **Dean Lombardi** and company turned a franchise dubiously known for their poor draft record into one which chose prospects – and patiently developed them – wisely, a state of worry hovered over Tinseltown.

It may have seem like a small consolation for some fans but while the Kings had missed the playoffs, their two minor-league affiliates – the **Ontario Reign** and **Manchester Monarchs** – had not only made the playoffs in their respective leagues, but both clubs were on a mission to make deep runs. This may have represented short-term success for a Kings fanbase looking to fill an unfamiliar void but in the larger sense, said success represented the strength – and the rapid growth – of the Kings' already-promising future, indicating that Los Angeles's playoff miss was a minor setback, not a major one.

While the Reign's playoff run ended in the **ECHL** Conference Final, that of the Monarchs did not as Manchester won their first **Calder Cup** in franchise history further signifying the solidity of the Kings' short- and long-term future. In fact, few were more integral to said success than reigning Calder Cup MVP, **Jordan Weal**.

I had a chance to speak with the Kings Director of Player Development, **Nelson Emerson**, about Weal, how he has become a better player since being drafted in 2010 (third round, 70th-overall) and even how he was undeterred physically by opponents in the 2015 **AHL** playoffs.

"Ever since we drafted [Weal], he's done everything that we've asked," Emerson told me. "When he was in Regina (playing for the WHL's Pats), he was scoring upwards of a hundred points three years in a row. Then we talked to him, thought he could play a more complete game and he worked on that. Then he goes

to the minors and he started a little slow trying to figure out the league but before you know it, the kid is, two years in a row, one of the top scorers in the American Hockey League."

Having been with the Kings organization since 2000, Nelson Emerson played for the club for a little more two seasons before becoming the team's assistant coach. In 2008, however, Emerson joined the Kings in the Player Development department and has been there ever since. About to enter his eighth season in said department, Emerson has been instrumental in helping mold the team's young talent, patiently and properly developing them into NHL-ready players. Jordan Weal is – or will soon be – no exception to this.

Emerson continued, emphasizing the adjustments Weal has had to make to become the player we saw in Manchester this past spring.

"One thing we asked him to do was to start using his linemates more, distribute the puck in the rush more, give-and-goes, not hold onto it so long. He did that," Emerson continued. "We also asked him to get stronger on faceoffs, bear down and tell him the importance of that. He was willing to learn that, willing to work at it. He's become a great faceoff guy in [the AHL].

Of course, while his willingness to adjust his game speaks volumes about his attitude, it is Jordan Weal's resolve and tenacity that should make the 23-year-old ready for the NHL much sooner than later.

"One thing you want to know is that when you look at Weal is that in the playoffs, every series was different," Emerson said. "In two of those four series, the teams were really taking runs at him and really were trying to get to him physically and as a small player, he kind of took charge of that battle and he wanted to make sure that he was not only willing to accept that challenge but to win that challenge. It didn't affect him.

"When teams were trying to take runs at him, trying to take liberties with him, he stood up to that and he figured out how to deal with that. Teams were trying to push him around after the whistle, really trying to get him off his game but you know what, his game didn't change. He still became the top player in the playoffs, winning the MVP for the playoff run."

If his natural talent, scoring abilities and being a consummate team player are not enough to earn the 5' 10, 171-pounder a spot onto a Kings roster which has an average size 6' 2 and 207 pounds, then Jordan Weal's toughness should erase all doubt.

On the precipice of making the big club last October, Jordan Weal was one of the final cuts for the Kings entering the regular season. While disappointment is inevitable under such circumstances, whoever thought Jordan Weal would be deterred to have to wait longer for his NHL debut were sorely mistaken.

In 73 regular-season games in Manchester last season, Weal scored 20 goals while adding 39 assists to help the Monarchs finish first-overall in the AHL – the first time the team had accomplished the feat in their 14-year history.

The Monarchs would accomplish a couple of more firsts: winning their first conference title and, of course, claiming the Calder Cup championship. Weal's postseason performance of 10 goals and 22 points was good enough to garner him playoff MVP honours, capping off a magical year that all but quieted his skeptics.

"We're looking forward to watching him in camp," Emerson enthusiastically closed.

This writer will go out on a limb suggesting that many more fans are echoing Mr. Emerson's sentiments. After all, when the Kings take the ice on Oct. 7 to open the regular season, many are hopeful – and many more unflappably confident – that Jordan Weal will be there, all the while – most likely – donning Emerson's old No. 19.