

A DISCUSSION WITH ONTARIO REIGN HEAD COACH MIKE STOTHERS

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 November 27, 2015



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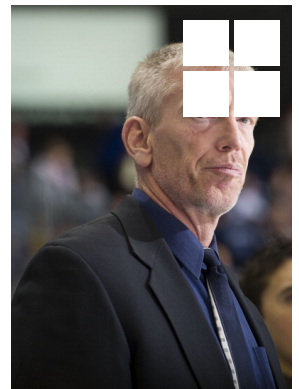
Following the 2013-14 season, the **Manchester Monarchs** parted ways with head coach **Mark Morris**, who had been at the club's helm since 2006. Morris also held the distinction of being the club's winningest coach. Unfortunately, the Monarchs had been eliminated in the opening round of the playoffs in each of the previous four years. So, in July 2014, the club went in a new direction by hiring former defenseman and junior coach **Mike Stothers**.

Succeeding Morris would not be easy, but Stothers came into Manchester and made an immediate impact.

Under their new coach, the Monarchs went 50-17-6-3 — reaching the 50-win plateau for the first time in eight years — while tying a franchise record with a league-best 176 goals against and finishing first-overall during the regular season for the first time in team history.

Led by **Jordan Weal**, rookie **Michael Mersch** and league MVP **Brian O'Neill**, the Monarchs rolled into the playoffs determined to erase their postseason woes. Despite needing all five games to get past the **Portland Pirates**, **it took the Monarchs just 14 games** to win their first **Calder Cup**, eliminating **Wilkes-Barre**, **Hartford** and **Utica** en route.

I spoke with Stothers recently, asking him about, among other things, his feelings on the championship-winning Monarchs.



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"It was a special season last year as we had a good mix of veterans and youth," Stothers said. "We had speed, skill and a team toughness both mentally and physically that allowed us to remain humble yet confident. The players made the commitment to play into June and deserved to be called champions because they never took a short cut or let each other down. We had great leadership in that locker room."

As special as last spring's championship run was, though, the win was a bittersweet one in Manchester.

During the regular season, it was announced that the Monarchs **would be moving to California** the following season. Along with **AHL** affiliates for the **Anaheim Ducks** and **San Jose Sharks** (located in Portland, Maine, and Worcester, Mass., respectively) the Calder Cup Champions would help form the AHL's new **Pacific Division** in time for the 2015-16 campaign. The Monarchs would then inherit the name of the **ECHL's Ontario Reign** while that club would move to New Hampshire to become the second version of the Monarchs.

Stothers discussed how his team felt about their eventual relocation and how they handled the news once it became official.

"The relocation did not come as a surprise as it had been discussed numerous times before," explained Stothers. "We as a team never mentioned anything about it until the official announcement was made. Then, we acknowledged it and put it aside. We were on a mission to go as deep as possible and do something special."

Mark DiOrto/Observer-Dispatch via The Associated Press
Members of Manchester Monarchs, including St. John's native Zach O'Brien (top row, second from the right) celebrate after defeating the Utica Comets 2-1 in Utica, N.Y., Saturday night to take the Calder Cup and 2015 American Hockey League championship. The Monarchs won the best-of-seven final 4-1.

"We all enjoyed our time in Manchester as it is a great city with tremendous fans. It was nice to share a feel-good ending to a very successful franchise that Manchester supported faithfully for years. The coaching staff also enjoyed our time in Manchester and had we stayed another season that would have been terrific also. Being in hockey you become accustomed to change and relocation it is just part of the job."

And the Reign's bench boss is no stranger to relocation.

After finishing his playing career with the AHL's **Hershey Bears**, the club hired Stothers as an assistant coach. Then an affiliate of the **Philadelphia Flyers**, the Bears, in 1996, literally relocated next door to their parent club, playing out of the old **Spectrum** as the **Philadelphia Phantoms**.

While teams relocating is commonplace in the AHL, it was nonetheless unique for a championship-winning team to be on the move, especially when the destination is on the other side of the country. I asked Stothers how the transition from Manchester to Ontario has been.

"Everyone has settled into Ontario easily and is enjoying the move to the West Coast," the head coach told me. "The city and rink are beautiful. The crowds have been large and passionate. It has been a relatively seamless transition."

What made said transition even better has been the strong start by the relocated club. After starting the year with a seven-game unbeaten streak, the new version of the Ontario Reign are now 11-2-2 to start the year. Yet, while he admitted that he didn't fully expect such a solid start, the Reign bench boss did emphasize how impressed he was with his team's ability to work hard and play as a unit.

"The strong start was a little bit surprising because of the number of players missing from last year's team," Stothers acknowledged. "That being said, I think all the players have impressed me with their work ethic and commitment to detail. We have been playing well as a collective group and not relying on one or two guys to carry the team."

While he is thrilled with his squad's collective success thus far, Stothers was particularly impressed with his star sophomore, the aforementioned Michael Mersch.

"Michael Mersch continues to be a beast with the puck," he stated. "Plays a heavy game and goes to the net like no other. Very impressive."



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Prior to joining the Monarchs in 2014, Mike Stothers had been a head coach for eight seasons but just one in the AHL. Also prior to joining the Monarchs, Stothers had never coached a playoff game in the American League but, by the time the 2015 postseason rolled around, it seemed as if it was Stothers's second go-around.

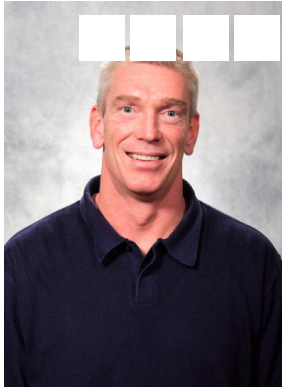
Never mind that the Monarchs had never reached the **Calder Cup Final** once in their previous 13 years but having captured the league's best record during the 2014-15 regular season, the expectations — and the pressure — of winning a championship became that much greater; a position few teams have been able to thrive under. But the Monarchs, under Stother's tutelage, prospered, giving the city of Manchester something to celebrate before giving their team their California send-off. In addition, the Monarchs also gave their parents' club fans some much-needed consolation after their beloved **Los Angeles Kings** had missed the playoffs.

While the success of any AHL club is, in one way or another, associated with their parent club's success, that of the Manchester Monarchs has never been more directed to the **Los Angeles Kings** than it has in recent years.

From **Tyler Toffoli** and **Tanner Pearson** to **Jake Muzzin** and **Alec Martinez** just to name a few, the Kings have celebrated **Stanley Cup** success with many products of the Monarchs in tow, and they don't plan on stopping there.



Even with their playoff miss last season, the solidity of the Los Angeles Kings did not taper and, despite being with the organization for just over a year, Mike Stothers has played an integral role in the club's overall success.



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Guiding the Manchester Monarchs to unprecedented regular-season and championship titles left fans in New Hampshire wanting more but they were still able to give their beloved team to a proper farewell. The now-relocated Reign, despite still being in the early stages of a new season, are off to an explosive start under Stothers, giving fans in Ontario more reason to regularly pack **Citizens Business Bank Arena** to the rafters.

Of Stothers, Kings' Vice President of Hockey Operations and Director of Player Personnel **Michael Futa** told the **Regina-Leader Post** the following in July 2011:

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Mike is a tremendous person and leader. He has a tireless work ethic that he will demand from those around him including his players. He is an honest, straight shooter who will be firm but fair with his team. His players will know exactly where they stand with him and they should be prepared to work hard each and every day.

Stothers and Futa had previously worked together with the **Owen Sound Attack** of the **Ontario Hockey League**. Stothers served as the club's head coach from 2002 to 2007 while Futa was the club's general manager during that time.

Futa's testimonial of his former head coach proved accurate as Mike Stothers has gotten the most out of his players from his coaching style, leading to championship success and promising results on a consistent basis in just a short period of time.

The Los Angeles Kings — and the Ontario Reign directly — are certainly lucky to have Stothers at the helm of their AHL club. But as thrilling as his success has been thus far, the excitement is palpable knowing what is still to come for the Reign and their rabid fanbase — and what will come for the Reign should come for the Kings.

It is just a great feeling for those affiliated with the silver-and-black; and fans, players and executives all have Mike Stothers to tip their hats to.