

# LA KINGS GM DEAN LOMBARDI ON MIKE RICHARDS: "I WAS PLAYED"

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The relationship between the **Los Angeles Kings** and **Mike Richards** has officially — and mercifully — reached its conclusion.

On Friday, it was announced that a settlement deal between the two parties had been reached. This coming two months after the **NHL Players' Association** filed a grievance on Richards's behalf after the Kings terminated the troubled forward's contract in late June on "a material breach of the (contract's) requirements."

Richards, who had five years and \$22 million US left on his deal at the time of his termination will now cost the Kings cap space of \$1.32 million — a diminutive fee — thanks to Friday's settlement. That number will be on the Kings' books for the next five years while a smaller amount will be paid to the 30-year-old until, if you can believe it, 2031.

With the settlement, Richards officially becomes an unrestricted free agent. However, he leaves behind a team — and specifically a general manager — in an emotional crisis, for lack of a better term.

In a written summation he provided to the **Los Angeles Times** on Friday, Kings' GM **Dean Lombardi** was quite candid on his feelings on the tumultuous Mike Richards saga, saying what happened to the Kenora, Ont., native was, among other things, "a tragedy."

"Without a doubt, the realization of what happened to Mike Richards is the most traumatic episode of my career," Lombardi stated in said summation. "At times, I think that I will never recover from it. It is difficult to trust anyone right now and you begin to question whether you can trust your own judgment. The only thing I can think of that would be worse would be suspecting your wife of cheating on you for five years and then finding out in fact it was true.

"Anyone close enough to me knows how much I loved Mike Richards. I believed that when I had acquired him, I had found my own Derek Jeter. But the fact is that he was never close to the player that he was after his best seasons in 2008-09 and 2009-10 in Philadelphia. His production dropped 50 per cent and the certain 'it' factor he had was vaporizing in front of me daily. This is a player that in 2010 was instrumental in Canada's gold medal run and by 2014, while still in his prime, was not even in the conversation for making the team."



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While many have been critical of Lombardi for not using his compliance buyout on Richards in 2014, it is evident just how emotionally invested the Los Angeles GM was in Richards since acquiring him in 2011 from **Philadelphia**. After all, while comparing Richards to **Derek Jeter** is quite the honour, it also does come with a great deal of pressure — even if it wasn't directly attributed to Richards' downfall.

After a mediocre three-year run with the Kings entering the summer of 2014, Lombardi decided not to buy out Richards but to keep him and his hefty \$5.75 million salary with the club for the next season. It was a risky move and one that did not pay off for the Kings as, in 53 games in 2014-15, Richards suffered career-lows in goals (5), assists (11) and points (16). Even a return to the big club after a stint in the AHL with Manchester gave the Kings and their fans some last-ditch hope that Richards would rediscover his on-ice prowess. Again, it did not work and the Kings missed the playoffs for the first time since 2009.

The prevalence of Lombardi's frustration shows that it is perfectly natural to feel disillusioned, and even betrayed, in this type of predicament. However, Lombardi showing such distinct vulnerability is, in this writer's mind, worrisome. Yes, Dean Lombardi is human, but to have a general manager who seemed almost invincible since joining the Kings in 2006 suddenly exposing himself of having chinks in his armour is not exactly a fan's cup of tea.



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"I tried everything with Mike – meeting with him constantly, sending him to concussion specialists, traveling in the off-season to visit with him at his summer home – and everything failed," Lombardi wrote. "I heard the rumours that Mike might have some off-ice issues, but I refused to believe that they were true despite some obvious signs.

"The reality is that I was 'played.' My only regret, though, is that I wish Mike had been able to come to me with his problem – and that was the last message I left for him on his cellphone when I learned of the incident and all the history leading up to the incident."

No one can — and should be — faulted for being loyal. As a matter of fact, for an NHL GM to display this could not be any more comforting. However, it seems as if Lombardi has let his loyalty cloud his own judgment of the real-life story of Mike Richards. This writer certainly hopes that he is incorrect in said regard but to call this episode "traumatic" and say that he might "never recover from it" to revealing new-found trust issues as a result or even comparing the episode to having an unfaithful spouse, was not easy to read. In fact, it was troubling.



To analyze Dean Lombardi's relationship with Mike Richards would be admittedly difficult. However, it was no doubt that it was a special relationship between the two just given the poignancy of Lombardi's words.



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This writer certainly hopes that Dean Lombardi is able to fully recover from this episode, even if it does take some time. In fact, Kings fans will be hoping that will be just the case because if it's not, then supporters of silver-and-black may have to anticipate — and dread — some dark days ahead.