

THE LA KINGS LOST JUSTIN WILLIAMS; BUT IT'S NOT THE END OF THE WORLD

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 December 3, 2015

Whether now, next year or 20 years from now, it will be impossible to reflect on the championship success of the Los Angeles Kings without thinking of Justin Williams. He was more than a clutch playoff performer, a veteran or a fan favourite. Justin Williams was that quixotic presence to the Kings and their ever-loyal fanbase. But for the life of a professional athlete, the span is short and Williams, as great a player as he is, is no exception to this. Yours truly has loved the one they call "Mr. Game 7" since even before he first donned the silver-and-black, but now, it is time to move on.

As if missing the playoffs weren't enough, the Kings had to enter the off-season knowing that Justin Williams would become an unrestricted free agent. Having established himself further as a clutch player come playoff time in addition to winning the Conn Smythe in 2014 as the postseason's Most Valuable Player, it was easy to believe that Justin Williams would be asking for a significant raise from his \$3.65 million salary when testing the free agent market.

Williams, however, surprised many when he signed a two-year deal with the Washington Capitals this week worth \$3.25 million per year, a curious decision considering that contract negotiations with the Kings were strained by the club's tight salary-cap situation.

Here is what the veteran had to say, courtesy of LAKingsInsider's Jon Rosen:

"Obviously we enjoyed [success]. We made the playoffs, except for the first year when I came midway through, we made the playoffs every time except for last year. I enjoyed a pretty good stretch there of three years with two championships and a conference final. Obviously things got derailed this year because of a lot of occurrences and things beyond individual control. Hey, that's part of a team. No team stays together the whole time if you don't win. Obviously there are some changes in L.A. this year because of that, and everyone's looking to get better. I know Washington's looking to get better, and I hope to prove that I'm going to make them a better team."

In fairness, there was more to Williams' decision than money and for the entire conference call interview, visit LAKingsInsider.com.

Similar to losing any free agent, the silver lining displays an opportunity for new players to emerge at the next level. In the Kings' case, this could mean Jordan Weal or Derek Forbort. This also means that some of

the current Kings can adapt to new, bigger roles. One such example is the newly-re-signed Tyler Toffoli who, while he certainly cannot “replace” Williams, does have the makings to pick up where No. 14 left off.

When the Kings acquired him at the 2009 trade deadline, I was both disappointed and excited. Disappointed that the Kings traded away Patrick O’Sullivan who, at the time, seemed to be a key piece in the team’s bright future. Conversely, I was excited as I had followed Justin Williams’ career in both Philadelphia and Carolina and knew the Kings were in for something special.

Unfortunately for O’Sullivan, his career didn’t pan out but Williams, to the delight of Kings fans everywhere, fit right in.

While a broken leg limited his 2009-10 campaign to 49 games, Williams’ next two seasons in Los Angeles proved just what an valuable pickup he was.

In 2010-11 and 2011-12, Williams averaged 22 goals and 58 points while, in the latter year, scoring four goals and 15 points helping the Kings win their first-ever Stanley Cup. But then, his regular-season numbers began to dwindle.

Williams would average 16 goals and 39 points in his next three seasons in Los Angeles, but did make up for it in the playoffs. En route to his Conn Smythe win in 2014, the 33-year-old brought more substance to his “Mr. Game 7” moniker, scoring twice and adding three assists in his team’s three deciding games that spring. His overall record in Game 7s was increased to 7-0, scoring seven goals during that stretch. One of those goals was a late tiebreaker in the 2006 East Final when the Cobourg, Ont., native sent his Carolina Hurricanes past the Buffalo Sabres and into the Final en route to their (and his) first Stanley Cup victory.

Set to turn 34 in October, Justin Williams still has a few good years left and he will bring an abundance of skill and experience to a Washington Capitals club wanting to get over that hump and win a Cup. As for the Kings, this is a chance to get younger, to make the most out of some new faces – one of which is Milan Lucic, who they acquired from Boston last Friday.

It is hard to achieve consistent success in today’s salary cap era, but the Los Angeles Kings have done that. The reality, however, for any successful party to remain so, it needs to evolve. The Kings are no exception to this rule.

We have expressed our sorrow, our displeasure over the news of Justin Williams’ departure, but we cannot be miserable forever. The grieving time has come and now it is gone. It is time to move forward and take on new challenges in an effort to restore championship success.

I will never forget what Justin Williams meant to the Los Angeles Kings and their ever-loyal fanbase, but when he signed with the Capitals this week, a chapter ended. So now, let's turn the page on a new chapter and see what it has in store.

For the Los Angeles Kings, 2015 and beyond may be without Justin Williams, but it does not have to be without success. Let us take the latter, restore it and dare ourselves to look back.

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