

DESPITE RECENT YEARS, DEAN LOMBARDI'S LEGACY WITH LA KINGS SHOULD BE CELEBRATED

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 April 13, 2017



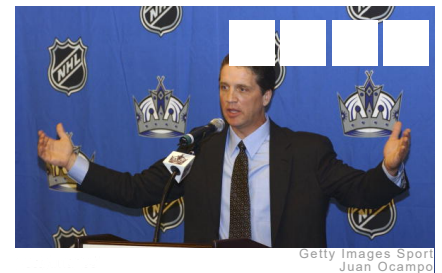
LOS ANGELES, CA - JUNE 13: General Manager Dean Lombardi of the Los Angeles Kings hoists the Stanley Cup in celebration after defeating the New York Rangers 3-2 in double overtime of Game Five of the 2014 Stanley Cup Final at Staples Center on June 13, 2014 in Los Angeles, California. (Photo by Bruce Bennett/Getty Images)

This past Monday marked the end of an era in Los Angeles.

Just one day after their season had officially ended, the **Los Angeles Kings**, in addition to firing head coach **Darryl Sutter**, had relieved **Dean Lombardi** of his general manager duties, effectively ending his 11-year tenure with the team. Yet, while this was a necessary decision given the club's struggles since 2014, we would be remiss to move forward without recognizing — and celebrating — how much of a positive impact Lombardi — and Sutter — had on a franchise that had, despite their run in 1993, never really come close to winning a championship.

When the season-long lockout ended in 2005, Kings fans were euphoric to have their team back. Unfortunately, the Kings missed the playoffs for a third-straight season. The miss prompted a change as Dean Lombardi was hired as the team's new GM, replacing the popular **Dave Taylor**.

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Upon his hiring in Los Angeles, this writer was aware of Lombardi's track record as GM in San Jose. While the Sharks didn't win a Stanley Cup under Lombardi, they did improve their regular-season record in six-straight seasons, erasing any notoriety of being one of the league's proverbial basement-dwellers prior to. Only **Hall-of-Famer Bill Torrey** had a better mark as a GM as his **New York Islanders** improved their totals in seven consecutive seasons from 1972 to 1979.



In addition, Lombardi made a name for himself at the draft while running the Sharks, selecting a handful of players who would become integral in the Sharks' success, such as **Patrick Marleau**, **Jonathan Cheechoo** and **Marcel Goc**. Even later-round picks like **Ryane Clowe** and defensemen **Christian Ehrhoff** and **Douglas Murray** would help turn the Sharks into a contender, even if they didn't win a championship.

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Still, while not winning a Cup may have been an issue for some, Lombardi's arrival to Los Angeles was the dawn of a new era and, despite his five-year plan in turning his new team into a Stanley Cup winner, the first priority for the Kings was to return to the playoffs, having not been there since 2002.

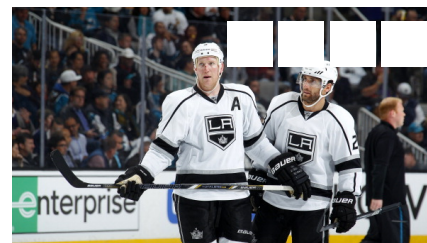
To say that those first two seasons under Lombardi's leadership were frustrating would be an understatement. Yet, many Kings fans, despite seeing their team suffer through unsuccessful rebuilds in the past, had hope that their new GM could turn the tide.

At times, this writer wasn't happy with some of Lombardi's decisions: trading the popular **Pavol Demitra** in 2006, for one — but in fairness, **Patrick O'Sullivan** and the pick that was used to select **Trevor Lewis**, who came the other way, turned out to be very beneficial for the Kings, especially the latter. Even trading the popular **Lubomir Visnovsky** may not have sat well with some fans but for **Jarret Stoll** and **Matt Greene**, the duo Lombardi acquired in exchange, no one can even imagine one Stanley Cup win, much less two, without their services.

But, many of Lombardi's moves that turned the Kings into a championship winner were actually ones he didn't make.

From 2006 to 2009, there were a slew of free agents and trade bait who, this writer felt, Lombardi should have acquired. But, soon enough, I came to admire Lombardi's decision to stay the course, to build through the draft and develop that talent instead of throwing money at big-name free agents such as **Daniel Briere**, **Chris Drury** and **Jean-Sebastien Giguere** or expensive trade bait such as all-star netminder **Roberto Luongo**.

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As frustrating as it was at the time, time would soon show evidence that passing on so many free agents did more good for the Kings than bad. Even **Ilya Bryzgalov** being claimed off waivers by the Coyotes left some Kings fans disappointed. In hindsight, though, it didn't take long to know that the Kings passing on him wasn't the end of the world — and I don't care how entertaining he was.

Even the talent Lombardi acquired through trades like **Jack Johnson** and the aforementioned O'Sullivan were later dealt to acquire talent that would help the Kings win not one, but two Stanley Cups — and those wins are

something that long-suffering Kings fans will cherish for the rest of their lives.

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To support Lombardi, the team's scouting staff played a significant role, as did the developmental staff. The coaching staff did their part moving forward and so did the higher-ups in the front office. But, from 2006 to 2017, it was Dean Lombardi who ran the show in Los Angeles and he did nothing short of an outstanding job, building a Kings team through the draft, an area where the club, for many years, struggled to find much success in. Even drafting **Thomas Hickey** — who never ended up played for the Kings — fourth overall in 2007 didn't deter Lombardi or his club. Instead, Lombardi moved forward, drafting the likes of **Wayne Simmonds** and **Brayden Schenn**, **Drew Doughty** and **Kyle Clifford**,

Tyler Toffoli and **Tanner Pearson** — all of whom were integral to the Kings' championship success; and yes, even the former two, who were traded beforehand to acquire center **Mike Richards**, another integral championship piece, in 2011.

Speaking of Mike Richards, though, that situation, I believed, was the beginning of Dean Lombardi's decline in Los Angeles.

Shortly following his team's second Stanley Cup win in 2014, Dean Lombardi had elected not to buy out Richards, who had progressively underachieved since joining the Kings. In fact, not counting the lockout-shortened 2013 campaign, Richards' 11 goals and 41 points in 2013-14 were his lowest totals since 2007-08 when he was with the **Philadelphia Flyers**. However, upon learning the news that Lombardi would not buy Richards and **his hefty** \$5.75 million salary, I gave the Kings GM the benefit of the doubt given his exceptional track record up to that point. I didn't understand the decision but nonetheless, Lombardi deserved a free pass, if you will, as far as I was concerned.

Unfortunately, the decision proved to be both futile and stressful as Richards underachieved to the point where he was sent to the AHL while the Kings found themselves in a serious cap crunch when defenseman **Slava Voynov** was **suspended indefinitely** by the **NHL** for domestic issues early in the 2014-15 season. Of course, while in fairness to Lombardi and the Kings, it was the league's decision to keep Voynov's salary on the Kings' books. Still, buying out Richards' contract would have given the team fairly significant breathing room in terms of affording to replace one of their top blueliners went, with all due respect to **Jamie McBain**, who was a decent pick-up.

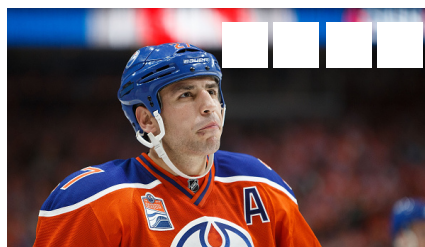
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Lombardi did, however, find a viable blueliner later in the season, although it would cost the Kings a top prospect in **Roland McKeown**. To make matters worse, said acquisition, **Andrej Sekera**, would play just a handful of games for the Kings before bolting for Edmonton in the off-season. Just a week earlier, Lombardi made a big risk by acquiring star forward **Milan Lucic** from Boston for goaltender **Martin Jones** and highly-touted defensive prospect **Colin Miller**. This was a move that continues to leave a bitter taste in the mouths of many Kings fans. After all, despite being effective in Los Angeles, Lucic was with the team for just one season before, like Sekera the previous summer, bolting for Edmonton. As for the pair Lombardi traded, Miller has since established himself as a reliable blueliner in Boston while Jones was flipped to rival San Jose before leading the Sharks to their first-ever Stanley Cup Final in 2016. In other words, it was a version of Murphy's Law for the silver-and-black and their fans.

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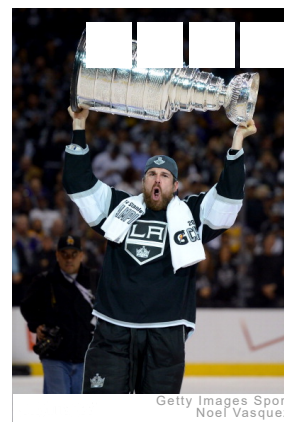
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In hindsight, these were unpopular moves — there's no denying that — but this writer admires Dean Lombardi for taking risks. He did it in 2011 when he shipped the aforementioned duo of Simmonds and Schenn to Philadelphia for Mike Richards and the same thing can be said for the following spring when he sent star defenseman Jack Johnson to Columbus for **Jeff Carter**. Say what you will about those he traded but Dean Lombardi's acquisitions were vital in his team winning two Stanley Cups in three years. There's no denying that, either.

One such risk I will always admire Dean Lombardi for occurred in 2010 when, in late-August, roughly seven weeks after the free agent market opened, **he signed** a talented defenseman other teams had kept their distance from given his history of concussions. As far as Lombardi was concerned, though, the former superseded the latter and so, as a result, **Willie Mitchell** became a King, and we all know how that turned out.

As for Richards, off-ice issues led to a further decline in his career, which, as a human, I cannot help but be empathetic towards. However, when Lombardi went public with comments regarding his protege in the summer of 2015, it worried me. Lombardi **had told** the **Los Angeles Times** that Richards' decline is something he may "never recover from" and even compared the situation to finding out that your spouse had cheated on you. Suddenly, the Kings' infallible GM was showing chinks in his armour, and it was upsetting. I'm certainly empathetic towards Lombardi — after all, unless we know him very well, we're not going to know just how close the now-former Kings GM was with Richards — but if personal feelings interfere with business to the extent that it means keeping someone's exorbitant salary — especially when that someone is vastly underachieving — in a tight cap era, then there's a serious problem.

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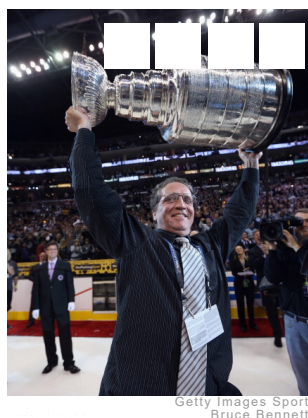


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Furthermore, there were quite a few more questionable decisions Dean Lombardi made during the latter part of his tenure in Los Angeles. With that said, some of us may be quick to forget the decisions he had made to not only turn his team into a championship winner but one which garnered unprecedented success along the way, which included becoming the first No. 8 seed to eliminate the top three seeds in their conference (in 2012) and winning three Game 7's on the road (in 2014).

We can sit here and shake our heads at him for his handling of the Mike Richards situation, the trading of top prospects and **even overpaying** to keep some of the club's top talent, and those decisions contributed to how the Kings have fared since 2014. With that said, though, no one can look at the legacy left by Dean Lombardi in Los Angeles and not appreciate the mark he left on a franchise whose fanbase could only dream of winning one Stanley Cup, let alone two, prior to his arrival. It is a legacy that has given Lombardi, in this writer's opinion, the right to call himself the greatest general manager in Kings history or, at the very least, support a strong debate for.

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Known for having a large quantity of draft picks early in his tenure, Dean Lombardi went the extra mile and made quality picks out of those players he selected. Not all of them made the NHL and not all of them lasted with the organization, but Dean Lombardi had a plan, a certain style, and he asked for patience in meeting his goals. Even better, as frustrating as that wait was at times, it was well worth it in the end because Dean Lombardi delivered on what he promised. Lombardi was even — sometimes to a fault — loyal, which speaks volumes, working for a franchise which was, at certain times, notorious for being anything but.

We may not have agreed with every decision he made but Dean Lombardi did his best to turn the Los Angeles Kings into a winner, and his work has left a once-long-suffering fanbase with a bevy of memories that will last for the rest of their lives and for future generations who they will proudly tell the tales of their team to, whether through footage found on YouTube, a collection of memorabilia or a beautiful tattoo commemorating their club's ultimate success.

For the Los Angeles Kings and their fans, for all of their successes and all of their hardships, these were the greatest times. For that, we can all thank Dean Lombardi as a result: a man who we all should wish the absolute best for moving forward.

He deserves nothing less.