

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM DALE DEGRAY

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 October 21, 2016



Image credit: Chris Thomas

He spent just one season with the **Los Angeles Kings** but it was a pivotal one for the franchise as it was the beginning of a new era – the **Wayne Gretzky** area.

With Gretzky's acquisition came the palpable ardor of the new season as the reigning **Stanley Cup** champion and **Conn Smythe** winner – in addition to the holder of a plethora of **NHL** records – pushed Kings fans to become euphoric at the possibilities of what their new star could bring. But, like in any situation, the success of a team goes beyond just one player, even if he is the greatest to play the game.

The 1988-89 Kings showcased a bevy of role players who would help turn the franchise into a perennial championship contender. From the already-established **Dave Taylor** and **Bernie Nicholls** to **Chris Kontos** and **Jim Wiemer** to **Marty McSorley** and **Mike Krushelnyski** – both of whom were acquired with Gretzky – the Kings were now a team on the rise and, just days before their season-opener, they acquired a key role player in defenseman **Dale DeGray**.

On Oct. 3, 1988, the Kings acquired Dale DeGray off waivers from the **Toronto Maple Leafs** in an effort to add depth to their blueline. The move proved to be effective as DeGray's six goals and 22 assists in 63 games would help the Kings jump near the top of the league standings at season's end.

In this week's segment of **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'** series, we speak with Dale DeGray, who discusses not only playing in but living in Los Angeles during his brief time with the Kings. In addition, Mr. DeGray tells us about his current position: general manager of the **OHL's Owen Sound Attack**. There, he guided the Attack to



the OHL championship crown in 2011 and currently oversees a couple of promising Kings prospects in **Jacob Friend** and **Matt Schmalz**.



Make Way for the Kings: The Kings claimed you off waivers from Toronto on Oct. 3, 1988 — just three days before their season started. Knowing that you joining a team that had a new look and a new star in Wayne Gretzky, how excited were you to join the Kings?

Dale DeGray: I can tell you for myself, Ryan, that was an exciting time for me. I was unsure what was going to happen to me. I thought I had a pretty good year the year before playing with Toronto but then getting picked up on waivers. But the funny thing about that is that I played (in Los Angeles) with **John Tonelli** in Calgary and I knew **Mike Allison** from Toronto, but I had to watch the first game on TV and I remember vividly watching it because I couldn't get my work visa put through quick enough, so I missed that first game. But I can tell you that being able to play with arguably the greatest player to ever play the game (Wayne Gretzky), it was just very exciting and the whole season was just unbelievable. Just the likes of some of the guys you mentioned like Timmy Watters, Dave Taylor, **Steve Duchesne**, **Luc Robitaille**, those sort of guys and it was, it really was, a great season and one that I'll probably never forget.



MW: In 63 games in 1988-89, while you scored six goals and added 22 assists, you were known for being a rugged defenseman and you let that show by accumulating a career-high 97 penalty minutes. How do you feel your rugged play complemented the rest of the team?

DD: All I wanted to do was to stay in the lineup that year, Ryan. I was on a two-way contract and so for me at that point, every day could have been my last day there. So, you know what, I just played hard. Day-in and day-out, I practiced hard and maybe that made things good for me and maybe my teammates liked that, maybe the coaches liked that because I pushed the pace a little bit and made everyone a little more accountable during practice. I couldn't afford to give the coach or the general manager any reason to get rid of me. So, that's how I ran that and for that reason. I was on a two-way deal and I couldn't afford to have someone send me away. I didn't want that.

MW: You were part of a defensive corps that included Steve Duchesne, Tom Laidlaw and Tim Watters. Describe the chemistry you had with them both on and off the ice.

DD: You mention **Timmy Watters** and **Tommy Laidlaw** were two guys who— and you mention Steve Duchesne, but Duchesne was a younger guy at that point — two guys who were similar to me but Timmy Watters and Tommy Laidlaw were unbelievable role models. They were great guys, they were very supportive and quite honestly, as far as the team goes, they were just great leaders and they were willing to help out, willing to put the team above themselves and really emphasize that. They were great guys to watch and see how the game was played and how to conduct yourself. So, really, really good role models on the back end for me.

MW: That season, you played under head coach Robbie Ftorek. Describe his coaching style and how did you benefit from it?

DD: First off, I got to tell you that every coach I had that played me, I loved, for starters, and Robbie let me play and I thought Robbie was a very smart coach. But I don't remember all that much about how he wanted us to play — obviously, that was a number of years ago. My thing was, and I said this before, I just wanted to go and play hard and do everything I could so that I could continue to play, and I think he liked the way I played. He probably saw me play in the minors quite frankly, which may have been one of the reasons he asked to get me at that point, but I don't know that for sure, Ryan, but I think that probably was the case. Then, I came in and just sort of did what I could do. But that's all I wanted to do: to go and play hard and be the best player I could be.

MW: In the spring of 1989, you were part of the first-round upset of the defending champion Edmonton Oilers. From Gretzky facing his old team to coming back from a 3-1 series deficit to win to an exciting



Game 7, there were plenty of fascinating storylines in this series. What do you most remember from that series?

DD: I know, and you might have to check this, but I remember scoring a goal and it was either the go-ahead goal or the goal to go two up to sort of put [Game 7] on ice but as far as goals go, it was a big goal for us and I know Kevin, or Bryan, Maxwell, whoever the defense coach was at that point– one of the things that I got to do was play a little bit against Mark Messier and sort of try to get him off his game a bit and I thought I did a pretty good job and that's one of the only times I think I could say that because [Messier] had knocked me out one time with an elbow when I was in Toronto. So, I felt pretty good about that and knocking him out and I did. I felt that I had a little bit to do with that and while I didn't have a huge role, I felt like I was contributing. So, it was a great series and I know at that point for L.A., it was a big series. So, I felt pretty good about that.

MW: After a couple of years elsewhere, you returned to southern California in 1992 when you joined the IHL's San Diego Gulls. Describe your overall experience of not playing but living in southern California. In many respects, it is a stark contrast from playing in Toronto or Calgary where you began your NHL career. Overall, how did you enjoy playing in southern California?

DD: The biggest thing for me about playing in California, Ryan, was when you left the arena, you got to escape the game. I could go to Venice Beach and I lived in Marina del Ray at the time. It was just nice. At that point, it was a good escape. You could come and put in all the time you wanted at the rink, play hard and then leave the arena and just really escape it, and I've had people ask me how was it playing [in Los Angeles] and I said how bad could it be that you got to drive to work every day in sunshine? Your window's down, your arm's out the window, it's pretty nice and obviously doing that while you're playing in the National Hockey League is that much more special, so it was a lot of fun.

MW: After your playing career, you moved to the front office where, after a stint in coaching, you became GM of the OHL's Owen Sound Attack, a position you have held since 2007. Since then, you were named Executive of the Year in 2010-11, leading your team to not only a franchise-best 46-17-5 record but the J. Ross Robertson Cup championship and a spot in the 2011 Memorial Cup tournament. Describe how it felt at season's end when the Attack had won the championship. Not only was it the club's first championship since relocating to Owen Sound in 1989 but it was just one year after finishing last in your division. As best as you can, take us through the emotions of winning it all in 2011.

DD: You're right. This organization has never won and it's tough because we're actually the smallest market in the Ontario Hockey League and second-smallest [leading only the **WHL's Kootenay Ice**] in all of the Canadian junior hockey leagues. So, that makes it tough but I can tell you, Ryan, that where we're at right now, it's not ^

difficult to recruit players. **Mike Futa**, who's [Director of Player Development] with the L.A. Kings, he [was the Attack GM] before me, so he can probably attest to this. But it's a small market but [Owen Sound] has got a big hockey-town feel. Everybody loves the game. Our rink only holds 3,000 people but we sell out almost every single night, so it's a great feeling. But I'll tell you about the support we had.

In 2011 when we won, on our way back into town, people lined the streets for, I'm going to be honest with you, miles outside of the town. People would come out with their flags and their jerseys and their hockey sticks. Everyone was honking their horns and got later at night and everybody had their lights on and I'll bet you for the last 15 miles, that's how it was in every town we went through. It was like that and then when we showed up to the arena, the arena was packed and we had a little bit of a parade going into the arena from outside of the town. Being a small town — there's only 22,000 people, Ryan — so they hurried up and we had police escorts. It was thrown together pretty quick but it was pretty impressive. It was something that I know any of the guys have been involved in would probably never forget.

MW: Of your current players, you have two Kings prospects in Jacob Friend and recent pick-up Matt Schmalz. Could you tell us a bit about both and how they look so far?

DD: We have Jacob Friend and Matt Schmalz right now but one of the other kids we had was [LA Kings prospect and former Owen Sound defenseman] **Kurtis MacDermid**. So, he was there and played for us for about three years. But Jacob Friend and Matt Schmalz have been playing very well for us in the preseason. Matt Schmalz had a goal and four assists for us in the preseason. I think he played three games. Also, I'm not sure but I think Jacob Friend had three assists.

I expect both to have very good years. For them, it's all about trying to adjust, work on your skills and your craft to become a better player and grow before it's time.

Bell Attack Awards BBQ: Dale DeGray Interview



In addition to his regular-season numbers with the Kings, Dale DeGray went on to score a pivotal goal in Game 7 of his team's opening-round upset against the Edmonton Oilers. In eight playoff games that spring, DeGray would add a pair of assists to his totals. But his offensive production wasn't all that was special about DeGray's tenure in Los Angeles as the native of Oshawa, Ont., showed off his defensive prowess in addition to dropping the gloves when he needed to, as his 97 penalty minutes attested to.

In just one season, the Los Angeles Kings went from 14th overall — seventh-worst – to fourth overall. Yet, while the likes of Gretzky, Nicholls and Luc Robitaille were all front-and-center in their team's turnaround, it was the role players, the unsung talent, that contributed just as much to the Kings' success that season. Dale DeGray was no exception to this.

Los Angeles was just one of many stops for Dale DeGray during his playing career but he has been a mainstay in Owen Sound where he helped turned a hard-luck franchise into a winning one – winning OHL Executive of the Year along the way — while helping to develop the stars of tomorrow, including the aforementioned Kings prospects, Friend, Schmalz and MacDermid.

His stay in Los Angeles was relatively short, but nevertheless, we remember Dale DeGray for his qualitative contributions to a Kings team during a very important time in their history – contributions that will forever be appreciated.

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