

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM DOUG SMITH

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 September 21, 2016



Image credit: Ryan Cowley Original photo credit: Bruce Bennett

He was chosen second overall by the **Los Angeles Kings** in 1981 and while he was part of the greatest comeback in franchise history in **'The Miracle on Manchester'**, **Doug Smith's** NHL career didn't blossom like many thought it would. But this isn't about what could have been. This isn't even about 'The Miracle on Manchester'. Ladies and gentlemen, this is a story of courage, resilience and perseverance — a story that Doug Smith wouldn't trade for anything in the world.

Having to wear ankle-to-hip leg braces as a child, adversity was introduced to Smith at an early age. Few, if any, would have deemed it possible for anyone with leg braces to even reach the ranks of professional hockey let alone being a Top 5 draft choice. One of the few who did believe in the youngster was Smith's mother, Carol.

Astonishingly, Smith proved the skeptics wrong when, as an 18-year-old, he made the NHL by joining the Los Angeles Kings.

After a nine-year career in the NHL, Doug Smith resumed his playing career in Austria. But in 1991-92, just his second season in Austria, everything came to a crashing halt.

Smith was going at full-speed when he went head first into the boards, prematurely ending his playing career as he shattered the fifth and sixth vertebrae in his neck.





As Smith recalls, his neck injury led him to a dark place. Being rendered a quadriplegic, Smith's life, which involved playing hockey for most of his life, suddenly turned into that of one lying in a hospital bed while being overcome with feelings of hopelessness and thoughts of suicide. But through it all, Smith found light at the end of the tunnel and today, he is thoroughly enjoying life.

In our discussion, a continuation of **Make Way for the Kings'** exclusive '**Royal Reflections'** series, we began with hockey, but transitioned, first to his injury and then his post-hockey career. As our interview went on, you could hear the emotion and the passion in Doug Smith's voice as we talked less about hockey and more about his life today which includes his wife Patti, who, through all the setbacks and hardships, never once left Smith's side.

This is Doug Smith's inspiring story.

Doug Smith: Open Your Mind



Make Way for the Kings: When you joined the Kings in 1981-82, you had joined a very young team who had rookies such as Daryl Evans, Steve Bozek and Bernie Nicholls. How did you guys get along that season?

Doug Smith: Yeah, I was 18 years old at the time the other guys were quite a bit older than I was. I think the next youngest guy on the team that year was 21 and **Bernie [Nicholls]** came to the team partway through the year and then we really gelled. I mean, **Steve Bozek** and **Daryl Evans** and I, that was the line on the ice for winning goal in 'The Miracle on Manchester' which is still in the record books as the biggest comeback in NHL playoff history. I won the faceoff from **Mark Messier** to win the game in overtime, and Daryl Evans took a slapshot and put it in the top corner. Steve Bozek was on the ice as well on left wing. So, we played a significant role that first year. It was like a dream come true.

MW: As best as you can, describe your transition into the NHL. Given the differences between Ottawa and Los Angeles in terms of, among other aspects, culture and weather, how was your experience in Los Angeles upon your arrival?

DS: The weather was amazing. The beaches were beautiful and the girls ... incredible. Going to Los Angeles in 1981 to play for the Los Angeles Kings at 18 with no support was mentally traumatizing and almost killed me, let alone destroy my will.

The cultural impact, the emotional trauma from going to Los Angeles at 18 basically because of the culture there and the way things were set up, the rules of the game and I'm talking about the rules of the game off the ice. There wasn't really the forum for players that you played with before to help you along.

The mentality in the National Hockey League in the early 80's was every man for himself pretty much. There was no approach to fixing the toxic culture because no one would ever admit they had a toxic culture. You

were supposed to feel and behave like you were fortunate to be there. Control! When I arrived in Los Angeles as an 18-year-old, the Kings put me in the Airport Park hotel for I think about two months, which was in the parking lot of the **Great Western Forum** in a bad part of town. I went off and bought a Porsche (cash) and one of the security people for the Kings gave me a long-barrel .38 special, loaded, so that I could keep it under the seat of my car, and I was a 18. I'm a Canadian boy from the west end of Ottawa, driving a black Porsche, living in a bad part of town where the Kings had put me, carrying a loaded .38 handgun and no one seemed to care one way or the other. Over the coming years it would begin to feel like it didn't matter whether I showed up at all. Very isolating.

MW: The Kings' opening-round upset of the Edmonton Oilers in 1982 has been forever described as one of the greatest times in franchise history. Take us through how that series was for you, especially "The Miracle on Manchester" game where you came back from 5-0 down to win.

DS: 'The Miracle on Manchester' was really the icing on the cake. For me as an 18-year-old, I was the only player on the Kings that year to play all 80 games and all playoff games. So, as an 18-year-old, I was the ironman of the team and beating the **Edmonton Oilers** was sort of the icing after making the playoffs, to overcoming the demons from that year being that the Oilers had twice as many points than us that year. But the unfortunate thing, the frustrating thing, is that we proceeded to lose to the **Vancouver Canucks** in the second round of the playoffs, and I can partly attribute that to the owner of the L.A. Kings for giving us a free trip to Hawaii for beating the Oilers. So, I think, looking back, subconsciously, we lost as quickly as possible so we could get on the plane to Hawaii.

MW: After a nine-year NHL career, you went to Austria where your professional career abruptly ended as a result of a serious neck injury. As best as you can, take us through what happened. How did the ensuing seconds, minutes and even days feel like?

DS: I went to Austria after things got political in the National Hockey League for me. We can talk about the politics of the NHL another time and another place.

I had a great first year playing overseas. We won the silver medal in the Austrian national league and then I had signed with another team for my second year in Austria. I was planning on coming back to Canada to go to training camp with the **Ottawa Senators** the following year in 1992, the first year they were starting, but I went full-speed head-first into the boards and shattered the fifth and sixth cervical vertebrae in my neck.

Three surgeries later, I woke up in intensive care a quadriplegic, and that was a week after our second daughter was born. My personal identity was instantly ripped out of me, I was suicidal for quite some time, we fought back going from a folding bed to a wheelchair to a walker to a cane. Had to deal with morphine

addiction — I was on 250mg of morphine a day for almost a year — and Halcyon, to knock me out at night. I had to let all the medication go to get my bladder functioning — I had lost bladder function, bowel function. So, I spent about a year in a hospital bed and my wife, she kept believing in me and I think that was the biggest thing because if it wasn't for her believing I could do it, I don't believe I'd be in the place I am today. I live today between able-bodied and quadriplegic but you would never be able to tell that I had a spinal cord injury.

I started skating again in 2005, 13 years after the spinal cord injury and broken neck. Today I am able to skate with the former pros in Ottawa. I tell them, too, guys like [former Senators forwards] **Radek Bonk, Shean Donovan** and **Shaun Van Allen**. I tell them that I'm happier now being in the dressing room and skating with the guys just once a week on Wednesdays at **Carleton University** [in Ottawa], I'm happier doing that than I ever was in the NHL.

I never really had any sustainable happiness playing in the NHL. It wasn't a place where leadership and management were building an enriching environment for their employees. Today, it has changed a tremendous amount and that is probably one of the biggest changes, seeing the environments teams have begun to create for the players. This is not a secret anymore. There was no thought put into the emotional environment created for the players back in the 80's. It just didn't exist. That's why charlatans like [disgraced former **NHLPA** Executive Director] **Alan Eagleson** came in and took everyone's money. It was an old boys' club extreme — it still is to a certain extent — but at least the Collective Bargaining Agreement protects the players from getting out of the game without anything, and then having to pay for the struggles through transition — a transition that's one of the hardest in the world to make because you started to be a hockey player when you were four years old and now you're 31, 32 years old with no purpose.

Hockey is a different economy than the business world, so the transition is very, very extreme. My work today allows others to break down the process

MW: After your injury, you slowly but surely rebuilt your life. Not even being able to imagine the physical and emotional pain you went through following your injury, I am fascinated to know of the road you took to get where you are today. Among other accomplishments, you have since become a successful businessman, author and philanthropist. Describe how you are making the most of your life today.

DS: When I broke my neck, I learned one important thing, one simple thing: That it's not about being the best *in* the world. It is about being the best *for* the world. I was conditioned as a very small kid to try to be the BEST IN the world and when they saw I was good, they actually told the people who had the resources and caring to help me to keep their hands off of me because it was obvious where I was going.



I thought my whole life that I was supposed to be the best in the world. But what I learned when I broke my neck, it's not about being the best *in* the world — you'll never find happiness there, ever — it's about being the best *for* the world.

So, today— my books “**Thriving in Transition**”, “**The Trauma Code**”, these books are my story of performance and recovery and about how to improve your mental performance and leverage your natural ability to perform better. They're about how we can modify our behaviour using simple actions in order to get what we want. They're about the science behind it for everyone to us. We can all leverage this natural ability and why it can be taught in a cohesive system. The books tell my story from going from leg braces as a child like **Forrest Gump** to making it to the NHL at 18 years old to playing against the top players in the world to breaking my neck and being paralyzed and having to start over again

No matter where you are in your life, your brain doesn't know the difference between performance and recovery, it doesn't matter where you are, you can turn it around or you can accelerate past the competition. I found that in my life, no matter where I was, I could always turn it around, I could always throw that switch and begin to search things out.

The other thing that helped me recover is that I wrote the process down. I made the decision to write it down because when you're gone, what else is left? Who's going to tell your story? So, part of the process for me was writing it down and putting it in a format, where I could give it to other people and they could reach their stardom.

Today, I provide a repeatable system anyone can use. There's a systematic approach to building a high-performance individual, a high-performance team or organization. It's simple, it's modular, it works every single time and it's based on behaviour, and anybody can use it.

I want to thank you for allowing me this platform to share that information with more people so that they can go to my website, which is **www.dougsmithperformance.com**. Pick up the “**The Trauma Code**” there. Connect with me on **LinkedIn**, communicate with me and one of the things with me is that I communicate back.

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As human beings, we all fall down. We can feel despondent, hopeless, lost and even like failures. But those dark feelings are only fleeting as it is how you respond to those feelings that matters. For Doug Smith, these feelings only scratched the surface when his playing career ended. But while his playing career did end, his life did not, and with the help of his loved ones, Doug Smith rediscovered that burning desire he was so familiar with as a child to get better.

If you take just one thing away from Doug Smith's story, let it be the reminder that no matter how challenging life gets and no matter how despondent you might feel, there is always — and I mean *always* — light at the end of the tunnel. There will always be better days ahead and there will always be those who are better people from hearing your story. The latter includes this writer who is inspired knowing what Doug Smith has come back from, that it is just common knowledge to know that nothing is impossible.

In addition, having also been a survivor of over 30 concussions, Doug Smith will also donate his brain and spinal cord to science to help future generations understand the ramifications of playing hockey.

A native and resident of Ottawa, Ontario, Doug Smith is now a successful businessman, public speaker, author and philanthropist. Above all else, though, Doug Smith is nothing short of the ultimate inspiration. I encourage — and even urge — you to get in contact with Doug Smith. Visit his website, **www.dougsmithperformance.com**, read his books, watch the videos I posted of him above and even connect with him on LinkedIn. Hiring Doug to speak to your audience will be one of the best decisions you have ever made.