

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM CRAIG CONROY

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 November 21, 2016



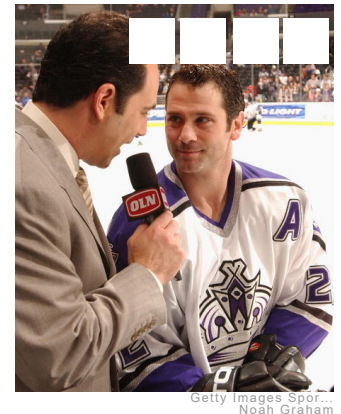
Image credit: Ryan Cowley Original photo credit: Noah Graham

If you watched him doing a post-game interview, you couldn't help but think how likable he appeared to be. His friendly, approachable demeanor was contagious to anyone who met him and whichever team he played for, the fanbase was that much more thankful not only for his personality but for his on-ice skills as well. This is former **Los Angeles Kings** center **Craig Conroy**.

While he was already an established **NHL** veteran by this time, Conroy, a native of Potsdam, New York, had never received such league-wide attention than he did prior to the **2004 Stanley Cup playoffs**.

Conroy's aforementioned demeanor – not to mention his 17 points in 26 postseason games – not only helped his then-team, the **Calgary Flames**, win their first playoff series in 15 years, but come to within one game of winning their first Stanley Cup crown in 15 years, playing under future Kings head coach **Darryl Sutter**.

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But following the 2004 playoffs, hockey fans were preparing for the worst: an NHL lockout which was believed to cancel the entire 2004-05 season. While the season was regrettably canceled, though, the NHL and the **NHLPA** reached an agreement for hockey to return for the 2005-06 campaign and, for Los Angeles Kings fans specifically, they were eager for a new face to join their team: the aforementioned Conroy who had signed with the Kings just prior to said lockout.

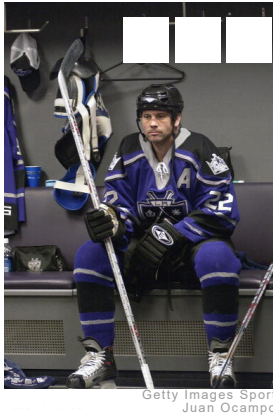
In a continuation of **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'** series, we speak with Kings' alum Craig Conroy, who discusses, among other topics, what motivated him to sign in Los Angeles, how it felt being reunited with the



late **Pavol Demitra** and even how it felt to see the silver-and-black win their first Stanley Cup in 2012.

This is Craig Conroy.

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Make Way for the Kings: You signed with the Kings in July 2004, just weeks after helping the Calgary Flames reach the Stanley Cup Final. What motivated you to sign in Los Angeles?

Craig Conroy: Obviously signing with the Kings in 2004, that was one of the toughest things I had going. I had talked to Darryl Sutter at the end of the season and the stance here in Calgary was they weren't going to sign anybody. So, I talked to [then-NHLPA Executive Director] **Bob Goodenow** at the time and asked, "What do you think I should do?"

He said, "Well, Craig, honestly, we don't know what's going to happen with this CBA. It's going to be a real battle and it's going to be a long one. It could be a year, it could two years."

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So, he said, "You're probably going to want to sign a contract just to make sure at your age."

So, free agency became a theme and [then-Kings GM] **Dave Taylor** was actually the first person to call and I know it was pretty early out west being in L.A. So, him being a **Clarkson [University]** grad and playing at Clarkson [like Conroy] helped create the chemistry then.



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Juan Ocampo

So, I had other teams. I was talking to **New Jersey** — they had been a team I was really talking to — so, in the end, it was just the vision and where [Taylor] was going, the players he thought he had coming and he

eventually said, “We’re going to win a Stanley Cup, Craig, and we’d like you to be a part of it.”

So, really it was a no-brainer for me to come in and sign with them and I felt really comfortable talking with [then-Kings head coach] **Andy Murray** and, you know, just the role they wanted for me and how they envisioned me with the team and moving forward, it was pretty exciting. You know, a long way from **New York** as people refer to the West but I was looking forward to getting to L.A. and starting my career there.

MW: Speaking of helping the Flames to the Cup Final, you were an integral part of your team’s run, scoring six goals and 17 points in 26 games. You also played under current Kings coach Darryl Sutter. How much of a factor did he play not only in your team’s run but in your performance specifically on the ice?

CC: You know, it was tough and I think the one thing when Darryl [Sutter] came in was Embed from Getty Images

that we had a young team and one thing he did was bring some instant credibility; a style that you wanted to play. I think, for me, that was perfect. There’s not as much X’s and O’s in Darryl’s system. He expects hard work and accountability out of everybody and he kind of puts a structure in place but he gives you the freedom to be yourself and play your game.

Also, if you’re not playing well, he’s not afraid to let you know what you’re doing wrong. So, you never felt like you had any questions. If I’m not playing or if I’m not having a good game, I’d be sitting on the bench. I think whether it was me, **Jarome [Iginla]** or whoever, it didn’t matter and that’s one thing I liked about Darryl: If you’re the star player or the guy that plays three or four minutes, he treats everybody the same. But you know where you stand with Darryl and I enjoyed playing for him.

Then, when he went to L.A., I thought it was going to be a real– what he does is he brings a team together and sometimes because he’s so hard, the group rallies around each other or he can push you in certain directions, which is nice, and once he got to L.A., when they won the Stanley Cup that first year, it didn’t surprise me in the least. I thought [the Kings] had a good team and you know Darryl would push all the right buttons and make it a little uncomfortable for everybody *laughs* but he had a game plan going and that’s why he’s had success in [the NHL]. But the one thing I’ll say about Darryl is that, as hard as he is, he cares about his players, and I believe that and I think the players believe that. But, he’s definitely hard and he definitely pushes, but he gets results.

MW: While it was delayed because of the lockout, your Kings debut came in October 2005 where you were joined by your former Blues teammate, the late Pavol Demitra, who had signed with the Kings



earlier that summer. Describe your chemistry with Demitra in St. Louis. How much of a factor did you play in him signing with the Kings?

CC: I was really excited when Pav signed. I loved playing with him. I didn't get to play with him a lot in St. Louis but being with him there for four-and-a-half, five years, it was special to know how good of a player he was. I knew he was coming [to Los Angeles] and talking to Andy Murray, it was an opportunity to— I didn't know if Pav was going to play center or wing but just to be able to— and I only talked to Dave Taylor when he asked me about him. I hadn't talked to Pav at all when he actually signed, so I wasn't really a big part of him coming, but I definitely made a strong pitch for him, saying I'd love to have him. He was a great player and such a good person, too, so it was really exciting just to go in and be able to play with him and it was so easy to play with him. One of the best players I've ever had to play with. I mean, I've had some unbelievable players like **Brett Hull** that I played with — a few games with him in **St. Louis** — in Calgary with Iginla — him and **[Michael] Frolik**. I couldn't have asked for better linemates and how they complemented my game and just how well we got along off the ice. [2005-06] was probably one of my favourite seasons playing hockey. We obviously wanted to make the playoffs *laughs* in L.A. and we fell short, but to have one year where I really got to play with [Demitra] was great. Unfortunately, they decided to move him out when **Dean Lombardi** came in that year. That was tough because we had chemistry and we were good friends — but just to have the one year with him and to have that chemistry that we had, it was special for me.

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MW: After scoring 22 goals and 66 points for the Kings in 2005-06, you returned, via trade, to Calgary midway through the 2006-07 season. Given the success you had in Calgary, you must have been excited to return, but how did it feel to leave the Kings?

CC: After having really, I thought, a strong year, the first year, it was a disappointment. But having new management and new staff right off the hop, hey, [the Kings] had a goal, they had an idea what they wanted to do there — *laughs* and obviously they won two Cups, so it was the right plan. They wanted younger players and go in a little bit of a different direction. They were talking about wanting that franchise goalie and **[Jonathan] Quick** actually came along right after that and while I didn't play with him, it was exciting. You kind of knew that maybe it wasn't a fit anymore for me in L.A. You know, that's part of the hockey business. I understood but I loved my time there and the fans were great there — that's one thing I'll always remember is how well they treated me there. But when I did get traded, we were playing in **Edmonton** but I was in Red Deer for a practice and

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when I talked to Dean Lombardi, he said, “Hey Craig, we traded you back to Calgary,” so, when I heard I was getting traded, professionally, it’s always tough but to go back to Calgary where I had the Stanley Cup run and I had friends still — it was only two-and-a-half years later — it was an easy transition for my family. It was pretty special.

But to be able to have played in L.A. in that first game [in Calgary] and the way the crowd tried to respond to me being back, I mean it gives me goosebumps thinking about it right now. It’s a reminder of just how special it was for me in Calgary. You know, you’re playing in front of your friends and you **score two goals that game** and, you know, it’s always bittersweet because you look at those guys and they’re all your buddies, but I knew it wasn’t working out [in Los Angeles] and you wish them all well and then you come back to a place you feel very, very comfortable with. So, you feel bad on one side but excited on another, but it was definitely an emotional 24 hours for me. I’ve never been a part of anything like that before but it was something that was special and I’ll never forget it.

I played in St. Louis, **Montreal**, L.A. and Calgary, and I loved every city I played in. They were all a bit different but they were all really great to me and especially Montreal because I watched [the **Canadiens**] growing up and it was really, really fun. So, to see the Kings win [the Stanley Cup], you’re really excited for them and even though I was only there a year-and-a-bit, being with **Luc [Robitaille]**, having him still there, and **Rob Blake** and all the guys, just great people all the way through the organization and that’s what made it nice for me.

MW: Overall, describe your experience with the Kings.

CC: I loved living in L.A. *laughs* I’ll tell you that. The practice rink, the guys– unfortunately, I wasn’t there as long as I had planned on it but– and the lockout season hurt, too. Then to have Dave Taylor move on who was the one who brought me in, was tough, too. But the one thing I can say about the Kings is that they’re first-class with everything they did: the way they treated me from the time I signed to even when Dean Lombardi treated me as I was leaving, how well they treated me. I had my 1000th game, so they sent me a great picture and, you know, those are special things. I wasn’t there long but I think that’s Luc and Rob and I think they want to be known as a first-class organization and they treated me with nothing but class from the time I got there to the time I left. I mean, anyone who got to play for [the Kings], you just see how well they treated me and how well they must treat their players right now.

CGY @ LA PPV Dec 19' 06: The Otherside feat. w/Craig Conroy



In 130 career games with the Kings, Craig Conroy scored 27 goals and 82 points, making the most of his brief time with the organization. Yet, while his tenure in Los Angeles was short, the loyal fanbase of the Kings hold the fondest memories of Conroy, even if their team wasn't a playoff contender at the time.

On the ice, he was a joy to watch but off the ice, Craig Conroy was just as noteworthy as his genuine, upbeat attitude resonated with Kings fans then and still today. Yet, while it was disappointing to see him get traded, the Kings did receive a fourth-round draft pick in 2007 from Calgary, **which they used** to select **Dwight King**, who was instrumental in both of Los Angeles's Stanley Cup victories.

On February 4, 2011, after a 16-year NHL career that saw him notch 182 goals and 542 points, Craig Conroy officially announced his retirement, moving into a management position with the Flames: first as a Special Assistant to then-GM **Jay Feaster** and now as assistant General Manager to current Flames GM **Brad Treliving**, a position he has held since June 2014. But to just to show how appreciated he was as a player, Conroy's alma mater, Clarkson University, **retired his No. 7** in 2012.

He may be most remembered as a member of the Calgary Flames but few can credit the Los Angeles Kings' ultimate success without tipping their hats to Craig Conroy, who, while he made the most of his brief time in the City of Angels, is justifiably and deservedly regarded as a class act both on and off the ice.

**Special thanks to Craig Conroy and Anita Cranston, Executive Assistant of Hockey Operations for the Calgary Flames for making this interview possible.*

