

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM JOHN SLANEY

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 January 5, 2017



Image credit: Ryan Cowley

The brief period between **Wayne Gretzky's** departure and the team breaking their playoff drought saw the **Los Angeles Kings** play in relative obscurity. From struggles on the ice to ownership issues off the ice, the Kings had gone through one of their toughest periods between 1995 and 1997. One member of those teams was a journeyman defenseman by the name of **John Slaney**.

Yet, long before he joined the Kings, Slaney was most famous for scoring a late, tie-breaking goal against the **Soviet Union** to (ultimately) win the gold medal for Canada at the **1991 World Junior Championship** in Saskatoon. The win marked the first time the host country had won gold at the tournament but for Slaney, his goal made him a prominent sports figure on a national level but especially in his home province of Newfoundland.

John Slaney was born in St. John's, Newfoundland on February 7, 1972 and was drafted 9th overall by the **Washington Capitals** in 1990. Yet, this writer was partial to Slaney not only for his aforementioned gold-medal-winning goal but simply due to the fact that he was also born in St. John's. After all, at that time, Newfoundland-born NHLers were a rare breed to say the least.

The Capitals would trade Slaney to the **Colorado Avalanche** in the summer of 1995 but after just seven games with his new club, he would be dealt to the Kings on December 28 of that year, just two months before Gretzky's departure.

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As **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'** series continues, we speak with John Slaney, who shared his experiences with the Kings.

John Slaney Scores in a Burger King Jersey



Make Way for the Kings: You were traded to the Kings in late 1995. During that time, the club was going through a major transition. In addition to ownership issues off the ice, Wayne Gretzky would be traded just a weeks later while much of the team's core would either be dealt or leave as free agents. What was the collective attitude in the locker room and on the ice like?

John Slaney: When I got traded to L.A., it was really interesting because I knew at that time, [the Kings] were going through ownership issues, but I was lucky enough to play with the best player in the league in Gretzky. He brought the game to another level with just how smart he was, how he controlled the puck on the ice and made everything look so easy for us. Unfortunately when he did get moved, it was a rebuilding year for the Kings and he did so much for the game of hockey in California. He brought it there and you can see that today how good hockey is out there in L.A. At the same time, that's when he was still the best player. He controlled the room pretty good but, like I said, it was really interesting to have played with the best player in the game.



MW: Describe how the 1996-97 season felt in Los Angeles. That was a year that saw a lot of roster players who weren't known for their time with the Kings, such as Petr Klima, Neal Broten and Paul DiPietro. How do you best remember that season?

JS: It was a rebuilding year. We had a lot of young players but at the same time, we needed some veteran players like Petr Klima and Paul DiPietro who, at the time, were good players. Pauly played in Montreal and Petr had that experience. Players like that are hard to find and when you bring in leadership, it's always a good thing but at the same time, it was a rebuilding year in L.A. and that's what [the Kings] needed to do and it was a lot of fun to see how that happened. So, as time went on, you see that over the years — years and years later — they ended up winning the Stanley Cup. I mean, there are a lot of things you can say about Wayne Gretzky who brought his leadership to L.A. and, while unfortunately [the Kings] didn't win [the Stanley Cup] when Gretzky was there, it's nice to see that they did win.

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Bruce Bennett
J McIsaac

MW: In Canada, you were famous for your game- and gold-medal-winning goal vs. the Soviet Union at the 1991 World Juniors. Being that there was still enough time left in the third for the Russians to tie, were you able to collect yourself and focus until the game was over or did you let your excitement get the better of you?

JS: I guess that year was really the first year that, for us, for the Canadians, it was the very first time we had won the gold medal for our country on Canadian soil. It was very important but, at the same time, it was really the first time that TV was broadcasting the games. You see it today how big [the World Juniors are].

Just how the game was and people, especially in Canada, loved it. But really, when it came down to it, we had to win that game against Russia and I just had to be in the right place at the right time. The old saying goes that if you never shoot, you never score, so I just wanted to get the puck at the net and have the opportunity to score and I was very lucky, very fortunate that the puck went in the net.

MW: In the summer of 2015, you were named assistant coach of one of the Kings' fiercest rivals in the Arizona Coyotes. How did your first season with the Coyotes go and how did you enjoy the rivalry with the Kings thus far?

JS: Yeah, after I was done hockey— right before I was done playing, one of the things was that I always wanted to be a coach. My last couple of years, and even before, I went overseas to coach behind the bench and I really enjoyed it. It was a different side of the game that you had to be ready for. I spent the last four seasons in Portland, Maine [with the Coyotes' AHL club], then got promoted to come here with the Arizona Coyotes.

You know, one thing about being a coach is that you learn new things every day, but I try to do what I was taught throughout my career, playing in the pro ranks and, especially today with the computers and the hockey systems, every team needs an edge to get ahead. I really enjoy giving back to the players and teaching them to small things of the game and that's something I really enjoy doing.

As for playing against L.A., to be a player who played there before, it's always fun to play against a team you played with and it's always nice to beat them, but at the same time, I've been very fortunate to be able to coach these young kids, these young stars like **Max Domi** and **[Anthony] Duclair**, **[Oliver] Ekman-Larsson**, who is a huge piece of the future for us.



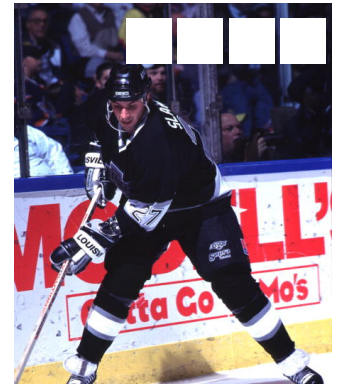
When some take a look at the roster of the 1996-97 Los Angeles Kings, they might be surprised to remember that certain players actually did suit up for the silver-and-black. After all, while the aforementioned Petr Klima and Neal Broten are certainly remembered for having great NHL careers, playing for the Kings is all but a brief sidenote, if you will, in their respective careers. Nonetheless, like John Slaney, their contributions to the Kings organization are no less important.



In two seasons with the Kings, John Slaney **would score** nine goals and 31 points in 63 games. Slaney would head slightly east to join the **Phoenix Coyotes** in the summer of 1997 but the Kings, who had missed the playoffs each year since 1994, would go on to clinch postseason berths in four of the next five seasons.

As for Slaney, he would make stops in **Nashville, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia** before finishing his 20-year pro career in Europe. Slaney would also spend much of his career in the **American Hockey League** where, until 2011, he was the league's all-time leading scorer among defensemen.

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Bruce Bennett
B Winkler

In 268 NHL games, Slaney scored 22 goals and added 69 assists to go along with 99 penalty minutes. But Slaney's presence led the way for many more players to come out of Newfoundland and join the NHL. **Dan Clearly, Ryane Clowe and Colin Greening** are all but a few Newfoundland products that can thank John Slaney for leading the way.

Slaney is currently in his second season as assistant coach for the Arizona Coyotes where he is helping to mold a young, talented team into a playoff contender in the near future. Being with the Coyotes also means frequent trips to Los Angeles to face his former team, even if the rivalry isn't as heated as it once was.

He may have been a King for just a short time but John Slaney's contributions to the organization are no less recognized and no less appreciated. So, as we celebrate the club's 50th anniversary, we say thank you.

**Special thanks to Rich Nairn of the Arizona Coyotes for making this interview possible.*