

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM STEVE DUCHESNE

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 September 12, 2016



Image credit: Ryan Cowley Original photo credit: Mike Powell

He was, and still is, one of the more synonymous names associated with the franchise. At the same time, he was also one of the team's more underrated players. Whichever way you want to look at it, though, **Steve Duchesne** was an integral part of the **Los Angeles Kings'** success during the late 80's and early 90's and, while his second stint with the club wasn't quite as memorable, the blueliner is still fondly remembered for his contributions to this day.

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Starting out in a small town before moving onto the bright lights in the big city is something that isn't unique when it comes to the life of a professional hockey player, but Steve Duchesne's story is no less fascinating.

From evolving into more of an offensive defenseman in junior to being signed by the Kings as an undrafted free agent, Steve Duchesne stepped foot into a whole new world in Los Angeles. Having yet to speak any English, for instance, communication was a significant barrier for Duchesne right off the bat. Nevertheless, the young defenseman worked hard and made his coaches and teammates take notice of his incomparable work ethic. This led to many successful years in Los Angeles where Duchesne, as effective as he was, became even better after his team's acquisition of one **Wayne Gretzky**.

In a continuation of **Make Way for the Kings'** exclusive 'Royal Reflections' series, we speak with Steve Duchesne who goes in-depth about his playing career, which he finished the way every player dreams of: as a **Stanley Cup** champion.



This is Steve Duchesne.

Steve Duchesne scores 1988



Make Way for the Kings: You began your career as an undrafted free agent. Depending on the individual, some are deterred from not being drafted while others simply use it as motivation to get better. How did you handle not being drafted and what do you feel you did to show that you deserved to play in the NHL?

Steve Duchesne: For me, I was waiting to be drafted in '85. Washington was supposed to call me and had told me to wait by the phone and when that didn't happen, it kind of made me mad because I was hoping the Capitals would be the team. So, it was hard and I wanted to prove to them that they made a mistake. So, a couple of weeks later, a guy named Alex Smart, who was scouting for the Kings at the time, sent me a letter inviting me to camp in Los Angeles and I ended up having a good camp that year.

MW: When the Kings signed you in October 1984, you were coming off a one-goal, 35-point campaign with the QMJHL's Drummondville Voltigeurs. The following season, you would score 22 goals and 81 points. What can you attribute most to the sudden surge in offense? Were you extra motivated after the Kings had signed you?

SD: The big thing for me in the year I scored one goal is that I had a coach that had decided I was going to be a defensive defenseman. I never played on the power play; I was just killing penalties that year. So, when I went to camp in L.A., **Rogie Vachon** was the GM there and he basically told me just to play my game and to tell you the truth, I just took that back to my next junior year — and we changed coaches that year — and I played a ^

more offensive game and I just grew from there. I had gone to camp in L.A. thinking that I really had a chance to make it to the NHL. So, I didn't feel out of place at camp. I felt really comfortable so it gave me confidence in thinking that I could really score goals in the NHL one of these days.

MW: You joined the Kings in 1986-87. Take us through what it was like to join the team. What was the atmosphere in the locker room like? You joined a young team that included Luc Robitaille, Bernie Nicholls and Jimmy Carson. Were you able to immediately find a comfort zone both on and off the ice because of the youth movement or did it take some time to adjust? Were there any players you clicked with more than others? Was there someone who really stood out and helped you in your first year?

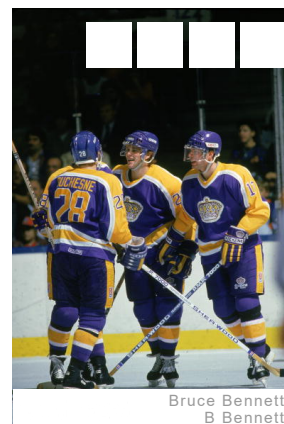
SD: When I did join the team, I could hardly speak English, so right away, I connected with **Luc Robitaille** and even **Jimmy Carson** could speak a little French and [the Kings] had a lot of interest for me to come in, so that helped. I felt the locker room was great. My first coach was **Pat Quinn** and I remember the first game of the year, I didn't play. He didn't dress me and we lost 7-2 or- it was a high score and Pat came to me after the game and said to make sure I'm ready for the next game "because you're going to play", and he ended up playing me the whole year. But it was nice seeing Pat Quinn in Detroit three years ago for the **Alumni Game**. Pat was there and I saw him. I told him, "I never thanked you for starting my career. You're a big reason why I did so well in the NHL," because he played the heck out of me. I was a rookie and yes, I made mistakes but he kept putting me on the ice and it really helped build my confidence. So, I'm very grateful to Pat Quinn for being my first coach in the NHL.

As for clicking with other players, I loved **Bernie (Nicholls)**. He was really funny, and Luc (Robitaille). Luc and I were actually roommates. We stayed at the same place with (future player agent) **Pat Brisson** with whom we played junior with. [Luc and I] eventually moved out. Pat never left but the three of us were together all the time.

MW: How much of a culture shock was it go from your hometown of Sept-Iles, Quebec to Los Angeles? You were in Drummondville in between for your junior career but you started in a rural town which is about 8-10 hours by car between Quebec City and Labrador whereas Los Angeles was, so to speak, the center of the universe in many respects.

SD: It was a huge culture shock as I couldn't speak a word of English and Sept-Iles has a 25,000 population. But I absolutely loved every minute of it. We went everywhere along the coast from San Diego to San Francisco and enjoyed the sightseeing. The only problem was [the Kings] wasn't very good until Gretzky came along.

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Bruce Bennett
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MW: Later in 1988 came arguably the biggest trade in hockey history when the Kings acquired Wayne Gretzky. Do you remember where you were when you heard the news? How did the atmosphere change in Los Angeles? How did you feel about the trade?

SD: I don't remember where I was but we all knew something was happening. I was in L.A. that summer but we knew something big was coming. Then, we heard— we were all watching the press conference on TV — and it completely changed the game in L.A., going from the colours we had: gold and purple to silver and black. You obviously knew it was Gretzky and we were all excited. I couldn't wait because I had a good feeling that he would help with my game. But it completely changed my life and one thing about Gretz was that he was always hard on players to do well. I mean, he could score three goals but it wasn't enough. He wanted to score four goals, five goals, I mean he was so driven. He even motivated me personally to do well and— you know, he helped me out every game. You know, you can cruise for 10 games but once you start scoring, you're on a roll.

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We also had a lot of attention, too, obviously with movie stars coming to the games and it really put a lot of good pressure in L.A. because before that, it was just, you know, nobody really heard about you. But everywhere we went, it was amazing. We would go to New York City and meet the people and fans, it really changed my first few years in L.A. That's for sure. (laughs)

MW: After five seasons with the Kings, you were traded but you returned in 1998. Describe how it felt being traded in 1991 and what motivated you to return to Los Angeles in '98? Being that you only played 60 games in your second tenure, how did you feel your return to the Kings in '98 turned out?

SD: I can tell you that for me, it was the hardest thing ever [to leave Los Angeles]. I didn't want to go, I wanted to stay in L.A. Obviously, Gretzky was there. I was involved in a trade with **Steve Kasper**. We went to Philly and **Jari Kurri** and some others went to L.A. So, I felt, especially after the year I scored (a career-high) 75 points (in 1988-89), I didn't want to go anywhere, so it was hard to understand as it was my first trade and I was a young guy and (laughs) it actually hurt my feelings. But it made me appreciate going somewhere else but coming back in '98, I felt so ready. I had a good year with St. Louis, had a nice contract, and to tell you truth, when I came back to L.A., I was so pumped and felt so good that I think I overdid it. I overthought things and I tried to do too much and next thing you knew, I was playing like crap and then they gave me 60 games and then bought me out and they traded me. So, it was hard because I wanted to do so good and I wanted to win the Cup in L.A. and I wanted to prove myself to them and not getting the chance to do that, it was really hard.

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So, I didn't like that experience, I'll tell you. I went from the best gut feeling going to L.A. to the worst— you know, I really lost my confidence, a lot of it. But it turned out really good for me because I ended up signing with Detroit.

MW: You finished your career the way every player dreams of: by winning the Stanley Cup. That year, you were reunited with one of your original Kings teammates in Luc Robitaille. How did you like playing with Luc again and what do you feel he brought to the table that put the Wings over the top? How did you feel not only when you won the Cup but for much of the season? Did you know that the 2001-02 campaign would be your last?

SD: When I went to Detroit, the limelight wasn't on me, so it made it easier to focus on my game and I played great in Detroit. So, when Luc joined me that year and we won the Cup, it was just a dream come true. But I lost seven teeth in the Finals so all my pictures, I have no teeth, but man, (laughs) it was worth it, I'll tell you.

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So, I ended my career. I wanted to come back for one more year but I had my knee replaced and my shoulders had the torn rotators. So, I knew it might be my last year but once I started skating again, my shoulder was just in bad shape, so I ended up delaying and delaying, seeing if I could play and trying to come back but, as you know, I had to retire.

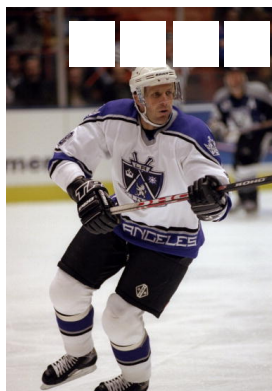
But that was a fun time and being able to finish that way and now, I've been living in Texas for about 10 years. I married [my wife Tracee] and her parents are in the area, so we came to Dallas and retired here [along with my two children, Dillon and Lake]. So now, within the last five years, I started a new business in charcoal — wood charcoal — cooking and full of energy. We focus on green, renewable energy and that's what my new career is right now.

Memorable Moments - Steve Duchesne Goal - 04/12/1...



If you'd like to know more about Steve Duchesne's new career, be sure to check it out at **TexCana Energy Inc.** It is definitely worth a visit.

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In addition to what he had achieved with the Kings, Steve Duchesne went on to have a solid stint in Ottawa where he scored the winning goal to put the once-hapless Senators into the playoffs for the first time in (modern-day) franchise history. Duchesne would also be a success in St. Louis and finally in Detroit where he, like his head coach, the legendary **Scotty Bowman**, rode off into the sunset as a champion.

Duchesne played 1113 NHL games, finishing his career with 227 goals and 752 points. For the Kings, where he spent a total of six seasons, Duchesne scored 99 goals and 216 assists for 315 points, forever leaving his mark on the team that took a chance on him in 1984.

From the perspective of both a journalist and a fan, the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Duchesne belonged to this writer. In fact, being that Duchesne was born in Sept-Iles, Quebec, this writer has long associated Sept-Iles, Quebec, with Mr. Duchesne — so much so that when a friend he met in childhood told him that she once lived in Sept-Iles, this writer immediately and enthusiastically responded, "That's where Steve Duchesne's from!"

A man of many accomplishments — both on the ice and off — Steve Duchesne is nothing short of a humble and grateful man — a man whose versions of his No. 28 jersey can still be found wandering the confines of **STAPLES Center**. That is just how much Mr. Duchesne, to this day, means to the Kings and their ever-loyal fanbase.

Such recognition is well-deserved.

**Special thanks to Steve Duchesne and colleague Jeff Duarte for their contributions to this article.*

