

# ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM JIM THOMSON

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 March 15, 2017



*Image credit: Ryan Cowley Original picture courtesy of Hockey Hall of Fame*

**Jim Thomson** was 13 years old when his hometown **Edmonton Oilers** joined the **NHL** as part of the **NHL-WHA Merger**. This began one of the greatest dynasties in NHL history, led by arguably the game's greatest player in **Wayne Gretzky**. Like every kid growing up in Edmonton, Jim Thomson dreamed of one day playing in the National Hockey League and, for many, to even play alongside Gretzky. Just over a decade later, Thomson got to do just that.

To be drafted in the 9th round would be a deterrent to some, a personal shot even. For Jim Thomson, though, it was just the beginning as Thomson, drafted 185th overall by the **Washington Capitals** in 1984, made the team just over a year later. There, Thomson was given the task of covering **Mario Lemieux** in his first NHL game.



*Photo credit: hockeydb.com*

After stops in **Hartford** and **New Jersey**, Thomson would sign with the Los Angeles Kings in the summer of 1990, splitting time between the big club and their then-AHL affiliate, the **New Haven Nighthawks**. But it was during the 1991-92 season where Thomson made a name for himself with the silver-and-black, establishing himself as an enforcer, racking up 162 penalty minutes in 45 games. He even added a goal and a pair of assists to his totals. Thomson was also an asset in the dressing room as he was known to keep his teammates loose — a quality that could be argued is more esteemed than what's on paper.

Nicknamed "**Horse**" by Gretzky and **Luc Robitaille**, Jim Thomson had become such a valuable asset that, shortly after being claimed in the expansion draft by the **Ottawa Senators**, his services were requested by the aforementioned Gretzky, prompting his return to the Kings in late 1992.



In this edition of **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'**, we speak with former Kings enforcer Jim Thomson who shares his experiences with the Kings, including playing with Gretzky and also under head coaches **Tom Webster** and **Barry Melrose**.

This is Jim Thomson.



**Make Way for the Kings: You spent parts of three seasons with the Los Angeles Kings, most notably the 1991-92 season where you amassed 162 penalty minutes in 45 games. Were you brought to Los Angeles strictly as a fighter or were the Kings expecting more from you?**

Jim Thomson: I would say I was brought there as a character player. [Wayne] Gretzky made a statement after we won the **Campbell Conference trophy** in Toronto that my value in the dressing room was as valuable as on the ice. That was the kind of player I was where I kind of kept the guys loose, was fair to everybody. So, my character was, as we know it, someone you want to be around, but definitely I was there to make the team more physical and fight if I had to.

I think the best way to put it was that Gretzky said to **[then-Kings owner Bruce McNall]** and **[then-head coach] Barry Melrose** that when they traded back for me from Ottawa — I went to Ottawa in the expansion draft — and then he told me— actually, Bruce McNall told me that Wayne came to him and said they wanted him back in the dressing room, which is why they traded **Bob Kudelski** for me. So, when you look at Bob, he was a 25-goal scorer, so it says a little bit about why they wanted me back, right?

**MW: After joining the expansion Ottawa Senators in 1992-93, you would return to the Kings late that season in time to join them for their Stanley Cup run. How did it feel returning to the Kings, especially leaving the Senators who, at that time, were notorious for their on-ice futility?**

**JT:** Well, \*laughs\* that's fair. I got interviewed the night I got traded back and my first comment to the press was— see, the trade was before the deadline at Christmas — and when I walked into the hotel — we were playing **Toronto** that night — a reporter said, "Sir, you got traded back to L.A. tonight. How do you feel?"

And I said, "Well, heck, I feel like a million dollars!"

Well, that was the headline on **The Ottawa Sun**, which don't go over too well with them. But Gretzky was— growing up in Edmonton, Gretzky was my idol even though he's not that much older than me. Obviously having him in your hometown and **[Marty] McSorley, [Jari] Kurri, [Charlie] Huddy** and all these guys who I grew up watching, it was a dream to play with them for the Kings, so I— honestly, it was like I had a second chance at something special and I never knew we were going to go to the **Stanley Cup [Final]** that year.

**MW: During your time in Los Angeles, you played under both Tom Webster and Barry Melrose. Could you describe the differences and similarities between the two coaches and how was your relationship with both?**

**JT:** Starting with Tommy, Tommy was a big reason why I made the team. He was a real vocal— you'd call it— not a buddy but he talked to you. He'd walk in and have a conversation with you while Barry would say, "How you doing?" and walk straight to his room. [Melrose] was way more business. So, both ways are good but both coaches were obviously very, very good — they were in the NHL — and I enjoyed playing for both. I played a lot longer under Tommy but I could see Barry— I played against Barry, so I knew what type of player he was. He was a tough player, so him and I have that in common, but both good coaches and both different personalities. So, one was at a distance, you'd perform— Barry was very simple: play hard, you'll play. Tommy was more the guy that would massage you more to help, if you will.

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**MW: Overall, could you describe your experience playing for the Kings?**

JT: I played for six NHL teams in my career and what was presented– let’s just say this: My first encounter with movie stars was **Sylvester Stallone** and **Kurt Russell** when they were shooting the movie **Tango & Cash**. They came into the dressing room and Hollywood was obviously was a part of the Kings at that time with McNall, Gretzky and [late actor] **John Candy**, but it was somewhat of a fairy-tale dream. A young kid from Edmonton and I’m sitting there and, you know, all the different celebrities that would come around and people who wanted to meet Wayne.

You know, Sylvester Stallone said something that I still remember to this day. He said, “You know, you guys look at us in awe and we look at you in awe,” and he goes, “That would be my dream to be out on the ice playing,” right? And then Kurt Russell goes, “Yeah,” and what was funny was– I want to say **Guns ‘n Roses** — it was some musician and he goes, “Yeah, but we all wanna be them,” pointing over to the rock stars, right? It was just funny the way he said it how he wanted to be a rock star.

*Photo credit: Tango & Cash via Grantland.com*

But, let’s face it, just seeing the people I met like President Reagan, that whole life situation in L.A., it was surreal, and when I sit today and think about it, it was definitely surreal, almost like a dream, and I can’t say that about any other team. You’re playing with Wayne Gretzky, you’ve got all these movie stars and just the whole Bruce McNall era. Whether he did right or wrong, he was a great owner to us and I have nothing but respect for him and he treated me great. He treated me like– that’s what made Gretzky special: he treated a guy like me the same way he would treat a superstar, and that’s why I’ve always said that he’s better off the ice than he was on the ice.

JT Prospect Camp 2016 - Jim Thomson on Hockey



Dreaming to play in the National Hockey League may not be unique but it is nonetheless special. For Jim Thomson, his 10-year career as a pro saw him suit up for six different NHL teams but it was with the Kings where the 6-foot-1, 205-pounder may have had his greatest success, **racking up** 237 penalty minutes in 62 games for the club. Thomson even finished his career in southern California, albeit with the expansion **Mighty Ducks of Anaheim**.

It was also in Los Angeles where Thomson, along with the aforementioned Gretzky and Robitaille, became enamored with horse racing — hence his “Horse” nickname — following the interest of Bruce McNall. Yet, while he should be admired for making an NHL career for himself despite being drafted so late, Jim Thomson should be — and is, quite frankly — admired *Photo credit: cbc.ca* more for his success off the ice.

Following his hockey career, Jim Thomson has become a coach, a mentor and a motivational speaker. In fact, speaking of the latter, the former King travels across Canada with his **‘Dreams Do Come True’** presentation in an effort to inspire and change the lives of people of all ages. Thomson also volunteers countless hours with an array of charities, including **Your Life Counts, Stop Concussions** and **York Regional Police**.

In addition to these accomplishments, Jim Thomson is also proud to be nine years sober from drugs and alcohol, which played a role during a very dark time in his post-playing career. With that said, the former King is using his experiences to help others on the right path, to believe in themselves and to achieve their dreams the best way possible.

For more information on Jim Thomson and his current endeavors, I urge you to visit his website at **[www.jimthomsonsdreams.com](http://www.jimthomsonsdreams.com)**.

The site also includes testimonials, information on each of Thomson’s current roles and even plenty of Kings-related material. So, please visit **Jim Thomson’s Dreams** today!

On the ice, he motivated his teammates through his toughness, displaying it with the drop of his gloves. Off the ice, he motivates larger audiences through not only his toughness but through his resilience and his will by sharing his stories of strength and adversity, having the power to transform someone down on their luck into someone who firmly believes that they, too, can do anything their set their minds to.

*Photo credit: wellandtribune.ca*

As someone who has stuttered since childhood and who has struggled with depression as an adult, Jim Thomson's story of perseverance is nothing short of inspiring. After all, as much as I admired him as a player, said admiration pales in comparison to how I feel about Jim Thomson as a person, as someone who is making a difference in the lives of others from so many walks of life.

During his playing career, Jim Thomson was known as a character player; someone who could liven up the dressing room with a lighthearted practical joke — a stark contrast to his tough-as-nails style on the ice. Today, the former King continues to prove why he is a character human being and for that, this writer is proud knowing that Mr. Thomson donned the uniform of the Los Angeles Kings.

Jim Thomson, here's to you.

*\*Special thanks to my assistant and friend, Anna Bittner, for helping me conduct this interview.*