

# ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS LEGEND JIMMY CARSON

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 August 22, 2016

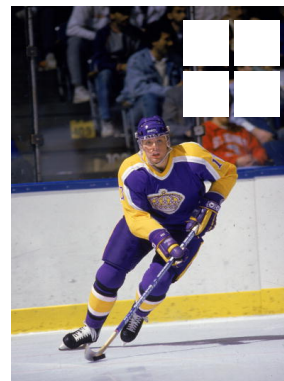


*Image credit: Ryan Cowley Original photo credit: Rick Stewart*

Between 1979 to 1981, the **Los Angeles Kings** had **great success** drafting in the first round. Outside of those years, however, the forum-blue-and-gold weren't as fortunate. That, however, changed in 1986 when the Kings had the second-overall pick — their highest since 1981 when they took **Doug Smith**. With their first pick in the '86 Draft, the Kings selected an offensively-gifted center out of the **QMJHL** by the name of **Jimmy Carson**.

A native of the Detroit suburb of Southfield, Carson was actually very close to being drafted by his hometown **Red Wings** who had used the first-overall pick in 1986 to take **Joe Murphy** instead. Nevertheless, Carson was thrilled to have been drafted by the Kings but with a high draft status comes immense pressure. After all, Carson **was coming off** a 70-goal, 153-point campaign with the **Verdun Junior Canadiens** in 1985-86. If there were any rules on feeling the pressure, though, the 18-year-old Carson, so to speak, missed the memo as his 37 goals in 1986-87 ranked him second on the Kings behind only (fellow rookie) **Luc Robitaille** and his 79 points and **Bernie Nicholls**.

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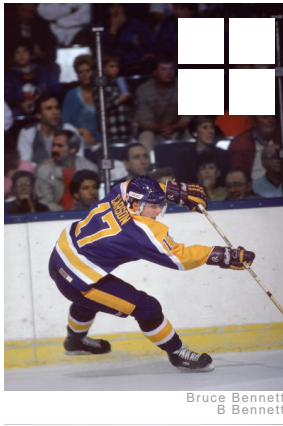


Bruce Bennett  
B Bennett

The following season, Carson would make non-believers of the so-called sophomore jinx, increasing his offensive numbers to 55 goals and 107 points. In a very short period of time, Carson found himself as one of the cornerstones for a promising young Kings club. But then, one day in August 1988 changed that as Carson found himself going to the **Edmonton Oilers** for, among others, **Wayne Gretzky** in what **has been widely regarded** as the biggest trade in sports history. But Carson's time with the Kings did not end there as in early 1993, he returned to the organization that drafted him, helping the club reach their first **Stanley Cup Final** in franchise history.



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Jimmy Carson's time with the Los Angeles Kings, though, came full circle in March 2015 when **he was honoured** as a Kings Legend at **STAPLES Center** where he shared a very special night with family, friends and 18,000-plus fans who appreciated everything he had done for their beloved team.

In addition to his time with the Kings, Jimmy Carson also had the opportunity to play for his hometown Detroit Red Wings — who acquired him from Edmonton for, among others, the aforementioned Joe Murphy — and don No. 10 for the franchise, famously worn by Hall-of-Famer **Alex Delvecchio**. Carson, however, wore No. 10 not because of Delvecchio but because of his boyhood idol, **Montreal Canadiens** legend **Guy Lafleur**.

Carson would go on to score 275 goals and 561 points over a 10-year NHL career that saw him also suit up for the **Vancouver Canucks** and **Hartford Whalers**. After a year in Switzerland, Carson would return to his hometown to close out his pro career with the **IHL's Detroit Vipers**.

From his start in the NHL, which included playing for three coaches over the course of his first two seasons, to being traded to the Oilers for Gretzky — something he has been asked many, many times over the years — to the Kings' Cinderella run in 1993, Jimmy Carson shares his thoughts on all of it with Make Way for the Kings as part of its very special **Royal Reflections** series.

This is Jimmy Carson.

NHL. Los Angeles Kings Honor Jimmy Carson At Stapl...



**Make Way for the Kings: You were the Kings 2nd-overall pick in 1986. Whether or not you were cognizant of it at the time, the Kings were, with a few exceptions, notorious for having less-than-stellar results from their first-round picks. You, however, were different. In your rookie year, you scored 37 goals and 79 points. Many 18-year-olds need at least a few years of developing before making the NHL but you made an immediate impact at the highest level. What gave you the confidence to be so productive right off the bat?**

Jimmy Carson: Well, I felt very fortunate to be drafted by the Kings second overall. I really wasn't aware of their past history with their first-round draft picks. I didn't really know anything about it so I just took the approach like I was going to do the best I can. My approach was just to make the team and, once I made the team, it was to fully compete to get power play time, then it was to fully compete to be one of the main players. So, I didn't put undue pressure on myself thinking, "Oh my goodness, the Kings have had a string of first-round picks that maybe didn't live up to speed or expectations," so it really wasn't an issue for me. Then, once I got off to a really good start, and, like you said, I did score 37 goals and that helped make an impact my rookie year.

**MW: What was the atmosphere in the locker room like when you joined the Kings? Trading Marcel Dionne during your rookie season, the Kings had a youth movement. I believe the oldest player on the club was captain Dave Taylor, who was just 31 at the time. But mixed with a nucleus that included, among others, Luc Robitaille and Bernie Nicholls, the Kings looked to be a team on the rise. How did it feel being a part of that team and what was the collective attitude like not only in the locker room but on the ice as well?**

JC: It was very interesting. I was the youngest player on the team and **Marcel Dionne** was the oldest, then you had **Dave Taylor**, Bernie Nicholls and **Mark Hardy**. So, we had some veterans and some young kids and we were a team that had a very good future. It was interesting because I had spent most of my time with Marcel, Dave Taylor and Luc Robitaille. Marcel and Dave — Marcel for sure — really had a different perspective on what the NHL was like because they were the 10- 15-year veterans — they had families, they were married, they were established, they had houses — and Luc and I were rookies, unmarried, and we didn't really know what an NHL career was all about. We just learned from really accomplished hockey players and people who took a very nice interest in us as players and as people. So, I really think that helped our development as players and as people.

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Bruce Bennett  
B Bennett

**MW: If there was any pressure with the so-called sophomore jinx, you didn't show it as you scored 55 goals and 107 points in 1987-88. Behind the bench in your rookie year, you had Pat Quinn and then**

**Mike Murphy as your head coaches. Midway through your second season, Robbie Ftorek was your head coach. Was there a difference in coaching styles that helped you increase your offensive numbers in 87-88? What else could you attribute to your increased production?**

JC: Well, I was very fortunate with all of those coaches as they all helped me in different ways. You mentioned **Pat Quinn** was the first coach I had in the NHL. He had a certain, distinct style: big, tall, booming kind of guy, a disciplinarian. With me, he treated me very fairly and gave me the opportunity to make the team as a rookie and thought, "If you'll make it, you'll make it."

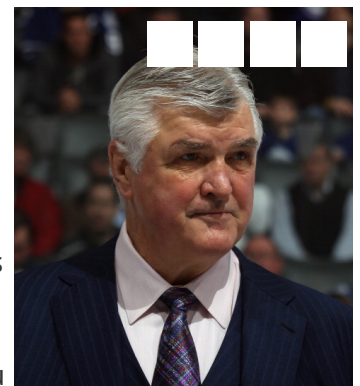
**Mike Murphy** helped me get to the next level. He increased my playing time in an offense to say that, "Hey, you can be one of the better players in the league and don't worry that you're just a second-year player. Don't even worry about it. Just go do every day what you can do."

And then **Robbie Ftorek** came in as well and helped in my second year. But then, for me, it was playing with some great players that helped, too. Luc Robitaille was my winger, Dave Taylor was my winger, Marcel Dionne had been traded by that time and we were really a young and up-and-coming team on the rise, and it was great to be a part of that. But once you have that confidence and production starts happening, it was kind of a snowball effect in a positive way.

**MW: Speaking of Pat Quinn, he was infamously suspended during your rookie season. How much of an impact did that play not only for you but for your team?**

JC: That was a big deal in the NHL at the time and, for me, I didn't know what I didn't know being a rookie, I was, like, "What's going on here?" The coach of your team is being admonished by the league for tampering or— I don't know what the actual charge was, or if he wanted to go to Vancouver. We also had a big event with Marcel Dionne being traded so, as a rookie, you have two major media events surrounding our team and it was a real eye-opener as to what professional sports is about. These things happen and you cannot let it affect you, especially if it's beyond your control, as opposed to how you can work hard in a practice and in a game. You just cannot let this extra-curricular stuff faze you because there's always going to be media stories and things you don't have any control over.

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Bruce Bennett

**MW: As hot as you were in your first couple of seasons, you were traded in 1988 to Edmonton in what is widely known as the biggest trade in sports history. Especially given how much you produced offensively, were you shocked at being traded? How did it feel knowing that you were traded for**

**arguably the game's greatest player in Wayne Gretzky? Take us through what that day was like as best as you can.**

**JC:** Yes, I was shocked. I've answered this question *a lot* over the years but here it goes again:

**Bruce McNall**, the owner of the Kings, after my second year, said to me, "Jimmy, you're going to be one of the cornerstones of my franchise and I want to sign you to a long-term contract. Buy a house,"

He assured me that his wife at the time, Jane, who was an interior decorator, would help me. He said, "I'll have Jane help you decorate the house."

So, I'm a 19-year-old kid starting negotiations on a long-term contract and I would like L.A. to be my home, so I went and bought a house and started negotiations with the Kings for a long-term contract and felt very secure. Then, early August, Bruce calls me up, "Hey, I just want to give you a heads up: we might get Wayne Gretzky," and I said, "What?! That's the most amazing thing I've heard," but he said, "But the problem is, they want you."

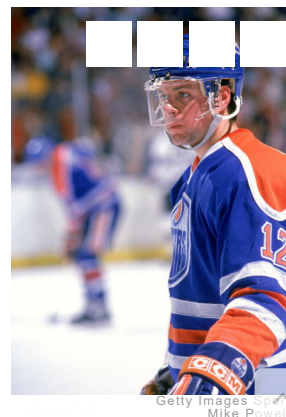
So, that was very shocking and he said, "But I'm doing my best to keep you out of the trade so we'll see what happens."

So, of course, the rest is history, I get traded. I was very shocked but sad too because it was my first experience with trades in pro sports and I got— you know, so much goes through your mind: I bought a house, had friends. Luc [Robitaille] and I had a good friendship, Dave Taylor, too. You have teammates you think you're going to be with for a long time and then, within a moment, it's done. You're gone. So, that's just pro sports and I quickly had to deal with that.

**MW: While they didn't have Gretzky anymore, the Oilers still had their championship nucleus very much intact. From Messier and Kurri to Anderson and Fuhr, the Oilers were still the cream of the crop, so to speak, of the NHL. How did you feel about joining a team of that calibre? Did you feel any immediate pressure to perform?**

**JC:** When I went to Edmonton, there were two things going on. One, the city, and even the country of Canada, were in utter shock that Wayne Gretzky had been traded. It was such a major story. In the United States, in Los Angeles, it was a major *sports* story; in Canada, it was a major *national* story where it was all about the national icon, how could this be, some were very upset at [then-Edmonton Oilers owner] **Peter Pocklington** where they'd come to games hanging him an effigy, and I was the visualization of the trade.

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But as far as the players were concerned, as you mentioned in your question, there were some of the greatest players in the game at the time, and possibly in history, and I was very blessed to play with them. I mean, you just go down the list: **Grant Fuhr, Mark Messier, Kevin Lowe, Glenn Anderson** and I'm sure there's more I'm missing, but we had a very good team and we had a very good year. Unfortunately, as fate would have it, we were up 3-1 against the Kings in the playoffs and lost in seven. But it showed that if we could have won that series, it would have been interesting to see how far we could have gone, but we didn't and it was just a tough ending to that season. But they were just some of the best players and a real treat to play with.

**MW: You returned to Los Angeles in early 1993, traded for another Hall-of-Famer in Paul Coffey. You would be reunited with Robitaille and even Jari Kurri but you would also be playing with Wayne Gretzky. For those reasons, it would be exciting but you also left your hometown team (Detroit Red Wings) where you spent three-and-a-half seasons. Overall, how did you feel about returning to the Kings?**

JC: You know, that was an interesting thing. Yes, I was very happy in Detroit, had some good teams going there, but Bruce McNall had always told me, "I'm going to try and trade back for you."

So he did and he got me back. But now, it was another situation where Paul Coffey was very loved by all the players, but I was very excited to come back to L.A. and we had a very good run where, if you remember, we went to the Final but lost in the Final in Montreal. But, we had a very good team, the city was very excited and it was great to be a part of that excitement to come so close to winning a Stanley Cup.

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The Kings have since won a couple of Cups but back then, they had been nowhere near a Cup, so the whole city was very engaged and excited about our run. So, yes I did get to play with Wayne Gretzky — that was a thrill, I did get to play with Jari Kurri again — that was great. So, overall, it was a nice to come back to L.A. and play with some great players.

**MW: In '93, you made an immediate impact with the Kings scoring 12 goals and adding 10 assists in 34 games before helping the club reach their first-ever Stanley Cup Final. Take us through how it was not only to be back in Los Angeles but to reach the Finals — the first in your career, as well — and the road you took to get there. I am especially interested in hearing about one of my favourite all-time series, the conference final against the Toronto Maple Leafs and the tension surrounding it. Melrose vs. Burns, McSorley vs. Clark and even Gretzky's high-sticking of Doug Gilmour in Game 6. Could you share your feelings on any of these storylines?**



**JC:** We were, standings-wise, pretty average in February-ish when I arrived. Then the team, together, started picking it up and then suddenly, we started peaking heading into the playoffs and a buzz started surrounding the team. Then, when we got to the conference final and played Toronto, it was a very, very intense series. As you said, there were a lot of storylines there: **[Barry] Melrose** vs. **[Pat] Burns**, Gretzky and **[Doug] Gilmour**, the high-sticking. There was just so much going on, the glare of the Toronto media, the Canadian media and then, of course, for the L.A. media, this was like a new-found event to see the team go that far. Then the city of L.A. starting getting involved. So, all in all, it was very exciting, coast-to-coast, traveling from L.A. to Toronto back and forth, seven-game series, and for it to culminate in a dramatic Game 7 win, it was just such a great way to get to the Stanley Cup Final and since it's every player's dream to get to the Final, I was very proud. It really was such a great team. There are players I haven't even mentioned like **Rob Blake** who played amazing, **Charlie Huddy** was there, there were just so many — **Mike Donnelly**, **Corey Millen** — we had a great team and we peaked at the right time, so it was good. It was just such a fun time.

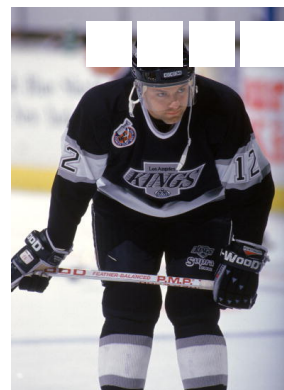
**MW:** In the Final, you met the red-hot Montreal Canadiens. After winning Game 1, the Kings found themselves in some controversy in Game 2 as Marty McSorley was caught with an illegal stick which led to the Canadiens tying the game and then winning in overtime. Could you share your recollections of that incident?

**JC:** That was unfortunate. It was kind of weird because (then-Canadiens coach) Jacques Demers was my coach in Detroit and I remember when he called for the stick, we were like, "Oh, come on! What's going on here?"

It paid off, though. We had a lot of momentum and everyone remembers that incident, but Marty played excellent for our team and had a very good run, a very good playoff. So, we could focus on that incident but in the end, we ended up losing that game in overtime, split 1-1 going back to L.A. for two games. Then, we proceeded to lose a couple more games in overtime. A couple bounces the other way and it's a different series and then we get back to Montreal for Game 5, well you want to talk about the glare of the Toronto media, you have the French-Canadian media where hockey is their religion and in the Montreal Forum, banners hanging and the excitement from the whole city, it was very intense.

It was an unfortunate result for us, the Kings, but it was a good experience and in a weird way, since Montreal has not won a Stanley Cup since — actually, I don't think any Canadian team has won a Cup since — the last Cup in the old Montreal Forum, in a very, very small way because obviously I'd much preferred to be on the winning side, but in a small way, you look back and say, "Wow, we were in that game in the Montreal Forum in a very historic game."

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**MW: This past March, you were honoured by the Kings as part of their Legends Night series. Take us through how that felt. How did you first find out that you were to be honoured? How did you feel the day of and especially during the ceremony?**

**JC**: I first found out about a year ago — so, August or September of 2015 — Luc Robitaille called me up and said, “Hey, we need to get some games for you and your family to come out because we want to do a night for you to become a legend of the organization,” and I thought it was a joke at first. I said that I didn’t know the Kings were doing that and he said, “No, I’m serious,” so he started showing me some other nights like [fellow Kings legend] **Tony Granato** for instance. So, I looked into that and thought it was great. All I can say is that the L.A. Kings organization were so generous to me and my family and I was very grateful to the Kings, Luc and the **Anschutz family** — just the whole organization for that evening. It was nice to be back in front of a crowd, so many friends, and to have my family there especially because my kids never got to experience seeing me as an L.A. King. I was in a Kings uniform before they were born and for them to see that and to see how great the crowd is and the intensity the Kings fans have for their team was great. To me, that just made it— and I said this in my speech that night — to be there at centre ice at the **STAPLES Center** with my family in front of a wonderful crowd with my good friend Luc and everyone else, it was a very special moment. I kept telling Luc that it was so much appreciated, I was so humbled and very thankful that I could have that evening.

Jimmy carson invterview



They were already a promising club, but with the addition of Jimmy Carson, the Los Angeles Kings became that much better. Despite being traded after a couple of seasons, the local support of Carson never wavered as



years later, fans, to this day, glow not only about what a great player he was but what a consummate gentleman he is as well.

In the past, this writer has alluded to going to STAPLES Center and coming across, if you would, a history of the Kings from all the jerseys worn by fans of players past. Jimmy Carson is no exception to this as most, if not all, would be hard-pressed to attend a Kings home game and not see No. 17 in forum-blue-and-gold with his name on it — or even a No. 12 in silver-and-black.

After a very successful two-year stint in the **QMJHL**, Jimmy Carson arrived in Los Angeles with great expectations — and he exceeded those with a vengeance, scoring a combined 92 goals and 186 points in his first two seasons with the Kings all the while never missing a game. So, as we look back on 50 years of the Kings franchise, we all fondly remember the contributions of Jimmy Carson who not only made his team better on the ice but who made fans in the City of Angels and beyond even more proud to be fans of the Los Angeles Kings.

*\*In addition to Mr. Carson for his time and contribution to this interview, special thanks goes out to Alex DiFilippo, Communication Coordinator for the Detroit Red Wings, who first made this possible.*