

# ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM KEVIN WESTGARTH

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 February 16, 2017



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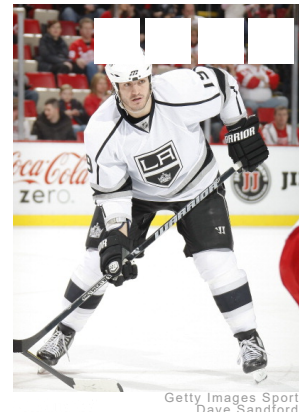
When he began his professional hockey career, he wasn't known as a fighter. It wouldn't be long, though, until dropping the gloves would become routine for **Kevin Westgarth**, who had established himself as one of the game's most fearsome enforcers before finding a new identity — and, in the process, achieving a childhood dream — on the other side of the Atlantic.

Born in Amherstburg, Ontario, Westgarth would grow up like many Canadian boys: dreaming of playing in the **National Hockey League**. In fact, Westgarth was noticed by scouts from **Princeton University** during a game where his older brother, and teammate, Brett, was the reason for the scouts' attendance. Yet, thanks to a couple of goals and a spirited fight, it was the younger Kevin who drew the interest of said scouts at game's end. Yet Westgarth's skill set wasn't limited to hockey.

While he did go to Princeton, Westgarth's on-ice talents weren't the driving force to his admission. Instead, he had been accepted into Princeton's engineering school before transferring to pre-med and ultimately winding up in psychology.

Despite finding his scoring touch halfway through his collegiate career, Westgarth was left undrafted. However, in March 2007, the **Los Angeles Kings** came calling as general manager **Dean Lombardi**, still early in his championship mission, signed the 6-foot-4, 234-pound combatant. From there, Westgarth would report to the Kings' farm team, the **AHL's Manchester Monarchs**, where he wasted no time in letting opponents know what he was there for.

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After accumulating 580 penalty minutes in 224 games with the Monarchs, Westgarth would take his talents to Los Angeles where, on a Kings team determined to win the **Stanley Cup**, the heavyweight would lead his army, so to speak, to the most ultimate of battles. He may not have logged the same minutes as **Anze Kopitar** or **Dustin Brown**, but Kevin Westgarth nonetheless cemented his role with his new team as a no-nonsense, tough-as-nails warrior who would give his team a shot in the arm with the drop of his gloves. Westgarth's efforts would ultimately help him, and his team, hoist Lord Stanley's chalice in 2012.

In this edition of **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'**, my colleague **Anna Bittner** and I speak with Kevin Westgarth, who speaks with us not only about his time in the Kings organization but about reinventing his game in, of all places, Northern Ireland as well as his stance on fighting in today's game and even about his current role with the NHL.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is Kevin Westgarth.

Paul Bissonnette vs Kevin Westgarth Feb 16, 2012



**Make Way for the Kings:** You were signed by the Los Angeles Kings in March 2007, quickly establishing yourself as an enforcer, first in the AHL with Manchester before joining the Kings. Considering that there is no fighting in college hockey, was becoming an enforcer a conscious decision on your part or was it a role that you adapted to over time?

**Kevin Westgarth:** For me, I had fought a little bit before coming to college in junior hockey in Ontario and as my college career progressed, I knew that that skill set was going to be helpful, if not necessary, for me to try to make the NHL and achieve that dream. So, I suppose it was a little of both; it was a conscious decision to use fighting and protecting my teammates as a tool to further my hockey career and doing whatever I had to to stay in the game and also something that I just kind of came to somewhat naturally was not wanting to see my teammates get cheapshotted or get hurt. So, it was always a part of my makeup to protect my guys and hopefully make sure that they have a lot of room out there to work with.

**MW:** After playing nine games for the Kings in 2008-09, you joined them on a full-time basis in 2010-11 where you garnered 105 penalty minutes and three assists in 56 games. Playing under Terry Murray at that point, were you used solely as an enforcer or did Murray, or even GM Dean Lombardi, have other plans for you as far as your role on the team went?

**KW:** Being a full-time player and a full-time contributor in all aspects of the game was always my goal. Fighting and enforcing was certainly my foot in the door, so Terry — Coach Murray — Terry knew I had these great components and always supported me in that effort in sort of making my— essentially rounding out my game, improving my skating, improving my passing, improving my hockey sense and that was something I worked very hard at and probably given a great opportunity in the 2010-11 playoffs for six games. Unfortunately, we lost that year to San Jose but I was very proud to have gotten that opportunity and I think that Coach Murray was good enough to give it to me and see that I earned it with how I worked and how I improved the rest of my game.

**MW:** Despite playing just 25 games during the 2011-12 regular season, you had nonetheless been a valuable commodity to the Kings entering the postseason and ultimately winning the Stanley Cup. Describe the feeling of winning the Stanley Cup in 2012. What was going through your mind when you embraced your teammates on the ice and even when you got to hoist the Cup?

**KW:** It was certainly the greatest moment of my, and my teammates', hockey career. It was certainly a moment you dream about, lifting the Cup above your head — every hockey game you ever played, every ball hockey and street hockey game that you ever played, so you visualize it hundreds, if not thousands, of times. So, when it actually happened, it was almost like, "Is this real this time?" It felt like a dream and you're just brimming with happiness and joy with your teammates. It was an absolutely incredible feeling.

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**MW:** In January 2013, just one day after the NHL lockout ended, the Kings had traded you to the Carolina Hurricanes. While you weren't with the Kings for very long, you were a fan favourite not only ^

**due to your enforcer role but as someone fans, especially those of the middle working class, could relate to with your industrious work ethic and the fact that you drove a pick-up truck as opposed to a fancy car like many players do. What was your relationship with fans in Los Angeles like and how did you feel about leaving the city and the organization?**

KW: My time [in Los Angeles] between the people in the organization, the teammates I had, it was amazing because I feel like I was there, from originally signing out of college to winning the Cup, at a very big transition for the Kings. So, being able to grow and develop with a lot of the players — a lot of them are still playing with the Kings — between the minors and the training camps and obviously making the big team. I just met some incredible people and I was actually lucky enough that the All-Star Game this year was back in Los Angeles and I got to see those people who are still working with the team and beyond that obviously, the fans [in Los Angeles] are such a great group of fans and such passionate fans and with that, it was just such a blast to come back and see some people I hadn't seen since I'd been traded. It's just a very special place for me and a very special place for hockey. It was very hard to leave and very sad. It was a by-product of this kind of fact that the team gotten so good and had a full, big, strong roster that I needed to move on essentially for my own career and I was lucky enough to get that opportunity in Carolina and to continue my hockey career, but it was a sad feeling leaving all those great people.

**MW: You finished your playing career overseas with the Belfast Giants where you embraced the role of a power forward. How was that transition for you and how was the experience of playing in Northern Ireland?**

KW: Oh, it was incredible. I mean the people of Belfast were also fantastic and, once again, kind of a non-traditional hockey market obviously, but with incredibly passionate fans. It was great to be able to expand my role, get back to scoring goals and getting some assists and I'm sure I made some mistakes in getting out of that much more basic role that I played in the NHL, but it was a blast and living over there with my wife was something we'll never forget given the ability to travel throughout Northern Ireland and Ireland, see a lot of England, Wales, Scotland as well, it was a pretty special time for us.

**MW: Did you find it at all symbolic that you were trying to find a new identity in a city that was determined in doing the same?**

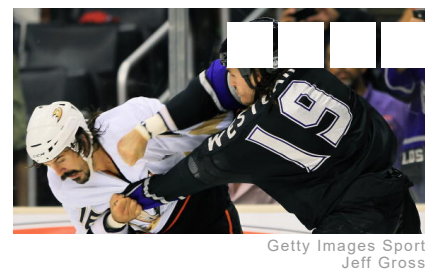
KW: I did, actually. It was interesting— it was great timing for me given that my career was coming to an end, so it was often a time to reflect the oddity of ice hockey bringing people together in Belfast: a very violent sport in a formerly violent city. Yet the environment at the arena is so inclusive to help bridge some of those old wounds. I think that that kind of paradox between a violent sport, allowing it to be a community to build together and try to forget their violence and obviously that rang true for me as well — a player who built up a ^

lot of his career with violence, as I said, protecting my team to be able to go over there and expand and be part of this whole effort was incredible.

**MW: How has your stance on fighting in hockey changed since you retired? With concussions having become prevalent in recent years, are we preparing for an era where fighting will be fully eliminated from the game or do you believe hockey will always have that aspect included, even if it is on a much smaller scale?**

**KW:** What I hope is that, as the heavyweight enforcers who have been a part of the NHL and hockey for the last, at the very least, 50 years — some people would say from the league's infancy — a lot of the time, those players were the epitome of a lot of hockey's values, which were sacrifice, work ethic, doing whatever it takes to help out your teammates. So, at the end of the day, that's what I hope doesn't get lost and I think we have enough great people connected to the game that it won't, but that certainly— as I said, I think the enforcer has the seed of a lot of these deeply-held values of hockey. It is sad to see some of us, some of the personalities, go, but the game is still the game and it's an incredible thing that can teach people about how to treat themselves, about how to treat others and how to improve your own life. I guess that's what I hope never gets lost.

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**MW: Today, you work for the National Hockey League where you are helping to grow the game in China and Europe as the Vice President of Business Development and International Affairs, where part of your focus is expanding the game to China. With the KHL expanding there and Beijing set to host the 2022 Winter Olympics, it feels like this is an ideal time to expand the game's popularity in China. Tell us about your role, what you've accomplished and what you hope to accomplish in the future?**

**KW:** I think— not just China but I think all around the world, there are a lot of people who have no access to the sport. People haven't played ice hockey traditionally in many countries around the world and in other places, it's not in the mainstream consciousness, so I think what we can do is bring not only the sport itself but the culture of the sport with those values and life skills that we can help deliver, and I think it is a beautiful opportunity to be able to join people through sport. We're at a position right now with so much focus outwardly facing and working on some domestic development as well to improve the experience, environment and culture — youth hockey, as well. It's been excellent to stay involved in the game with the passion and the love, so I certainly hope that there'll be thousands and thousands and eventually millions more playing the game that I love and being able to share that with them. It would be a huge success.

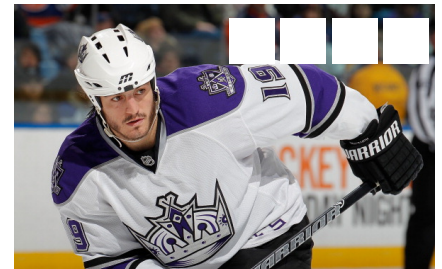
You Can Play - Kevin Westgarth



In 169 career games in the NHL, he accumulated 266 penalty minutes while scoring seven goals and nine assists. However, there was something more special about Kevin Westgarth during his playing days in Los Angeles, and even in Manchester, that helped fans gravitate toward him. For some, it was living vicariously through him during a fight as a way to channel their own frustrations; for others, it was seeing a hard-working, unassuming guy in a T-shirt and jeans driving, as previously noted, a pick-up truck. For the fans who have had the pleasure of meeting him, though, it was coming into a contact with a consummate gentleman whose absence of ego was as distinguishable as his long, flowing hair.

When he was traded to **Carolina** just before the shortened 2013 season was to begin, many Kings fans expressed their sadness. It didn't matter that he played just 25 games the season before or that he spent the majority of his ice time on the club's fourth line. What mattered was the impact Kevin Westgarth left on the Los Angeles Kings and their ever-loyal fanbase – an impact that helps him reside on the same echelon as some of the greatest players to ever suit up for this proud franchise.

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Yet, as successful as his career in North America was, Westgarth wasn't able to try his hand at being a power forward. That all changed, though, when the big man got to Northern Ireland, **embracing said role**, which he was enamoured by since first playing the game as a boy while doing his best to emulate his childhood idol, **Cam Neely**.

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On the ice, Kevin Westgarth served his purpose both in North America and Europe before serving the game in a whole new capacity: working alongside



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**NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly** to help strengthen hockey internationally, spreading the game to countries where hockey was nowhere near the front pages of the sports section. As for skeptics who say such a thing can't be done, though, look no further than the state of California and Los Angeles in particular where, despite its warm climate, hockey has succeeded with a vengeance.

Suiting up for and succeeding with the Los Angeles Kings is what made Kevin Westgarth one of the all-time fan favourites in southern California to this day. It is his eloquence, though, his intelligence and his down-to-earth demeanor that has made Kevin Westgarth an invaluable ambassador to the game of hockey. That, plain and simply, is something that leaves the ever-loyal fanbase of the Kings brimming with an immense amount of pride.

For fans of the Los Angeles Kings, they would be hard-pressed to glow about their team's championship success without mentioning the name of Kevin Westgarth, and for good reason. Mr. Westgarth had that much of an impact on the Kings' fanbase and the team itself – and that is something no one in the City of Angels, and beyond, will ever forget.

*\*Special thanks to my assistant and friend, Anna Bittner, for helping me conduct this interview. Additionally, thank you to Mr. Westgarth for taking time out of his busy schedule to speak with us and share his experiences.*