

# ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS LEGEND KELLY HRUDEY

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 November 29, 2016



*Image credit: Ryan Cowley Original photo credit: Bruce Bennett*

It was not as a member of the **Los Angeles Kings** but rather a member of the **New York Islanders** when this writer, as a very young child, was first introduced to this flashy netminder.

In what will forever be known as '**The Easter Epic**,' Game 7 of the 1987 **Patrick Division** semi-final saw the Isles visit the **Washington Capitals** in hopes of avenging their opening-round loss to them the previous spring.

While **Bob Mason** was between the pipes for the Caps, the Islanders elected not to start future Hall-of-Famer **Billy Smith** between the pipes but the younger **Kelly Hrudehy**. It was a move that paid off both for the Isles and Hrudehy.

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From flashing the leather on a textbook **Bobby Gould** wristshot to denying **Dave Christian** on an otherwise-perfect one-timer, Kelly Hrudehy celebrated his coming-out party on this night, making a grand total of 73 saves in a game that lasted seven periods – eventually ended by a **Pat LaFontaine** slapshot to catapult the Islanders into the next round.

Born on January 13, 1961 in Edmonton, Kelly Hrudehy was drafted 38<sup>th</sup> overall by the Islanders in 1980 and was thought to be the team's goaltender of the future. However, less than two years after his marathon playoff win, he was traded to the aforementioned Los Angeles Kings for defenseman **Wayne McBean** and fellow netminder **Mark Fitzpatrick**.

Hrudehy would join a new-look Kings team in time for them to pull off a stunning opening-round upset of his hometown **Edmonton Oilers**, who, at the time, were the defending Stanley Cup champions.



Hrudey would go on to spend parts of eight seasons with the Kings, helping them win their first – and, to date, only – division title in 1991 and to their first Stanley Cup Final in 1993. But Hrudey's tenure in Los Angeles ran deeper as fans – especially the female ones — were immediately enamoured by the netminder who displayed a great deal of flash on the ice and charm off of it.

In a continuation of **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'** series, we speak with Kings' legend Kelly Hrudey, who discusses his career in Los Angeles, how he felt about being traded to the Kings, being honoured by the club in recent years and even how his calling card, so to speak, originated, referring to the light-blue bandanna he sported during games.

#### History Will Be Made - Kelly Hrudey



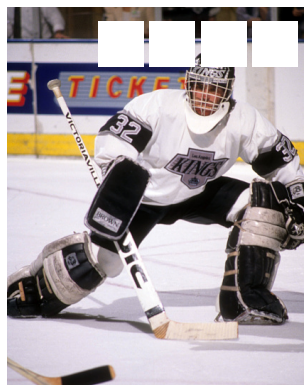
**Make Way for the Kings: Your Kings career began on February 22, 1989 when the Islanders traded you to Los Angeles for Mark Fitzpatrick and Wayne McBean. What was going through your mind when you found out the news? On the one hand, you were joining a club that was now led by the game's greatest player in Wayne Gretzky but you were also leaving a team where you were established yourself as a bona fide starter, which meant taking the reigns, if you will, in goal from future Hall-of-Famer Billy**



**Smith. Were you more excited to join the Kings? Disappointed to leave Long Island? Describe the overall feeling as best as you can.**

Kelly Hruddy: Well– boy, this was an issue that– it's hard to describe the feelings you have because when I went through the trade and knowing I was going to go to L.A. and play with Gretzky, it was complete mixed emotions for sure.

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Bruce Bennett  
B Bennett

First of all, I never wanted to leave Long Island. I was hoping to be a New York Islander for the rest of my life, win championships and be a part of that organization forever. So, it certainly upends your world. It changes your life completely when you get a call that you're being traded to a different city and how that's going to affect your family. My wife– we already had one daughter, we had another daughter on the way being about a month away from giving birth to her. It hurts. It really hurts when you're no longer wanted by an organization and you feel betrayed because your loyalty is not being reciprocated. So, that's how I felt at the time.

Now, many years later looking back, it happened to be the best thing in my life. [Going to Los Angeles] turned out to be an amazing hockey experience, it happened to be an amazing personal journey. In Los Angeles, I'd have to say that the biggest changes in my life happened both on the ice and off — a lot of growth in that sense — and then when you look back again, it's all the experiences, and you mentioned Billy Smith and how I learned from him to be a number-one guy because I had always shared the duties with Billy on Long Island. So, when you are the number-one guy, you have greater pressure, you have greater responsibilities and you feel it. So, you have to learn how to manage that and deal with that kind of pressure.

So, all in all, when I look back on my hockey career, playing in Los Angeles turned out to be the greatest thing I could have ever wished for.

**MW: When you arrived in Los Angeles, you were immediately sharing the goaltending duties with your future Hockey Night in Canada colleague Glenn Healy. How did you guys get along? Replacing an unseasoned rookie in Mark Fitzpatrick with an established veteran like yourself, how did Healy feel about the change? Was there any tension at all or was it simply a case of focusing on the team's overall success?**

KR: \*laughing\* We got along famously. **Glenn** is a real character. I mean he is a really, really funny guy. He was a real fierce competitor. I don't think he would have liked the fact that I would've been traded there and take away from his ice time, but I would have never known that because he never shared that with me. He was the ultimate professional and he was a great teammate. I felt badly for him that I was the guy but unfortunately,

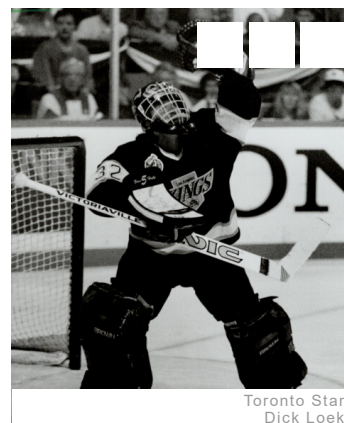
that's just pro sports. But I was happy for Glenn when he got to go to my old team, the New York Islanders in the off-season and he had a great run with them in 92-93 taking them to the conference finals and one of the great upsets in the NHL that year when they beat Pittsburgh on a goal by **David Volek**. So, yes, he and I remain great friends to this day.

**MW: The Kings had some great teams in the early 90's. A division title, consecutive oustings of the Stanley Cup champions and reaching the Finals in '93, you were an integral part in the Kings success during that time. What can you attribute most to your success in Los Angeles?**

**KR:** I think a lot of it goes back to how we had really great players but the right attitude that wanted to grow the game, starting with **Wayne [Gretzky]**. He recognized the importance of all of us being really good ambassadors on and off the ice. I think one of the things that really made the game so popular in California at the time, and what has grown the game to this day, is because we were willing to play a really exciting brand of hockey. So, I knew that going into a lot of the games, the score might be 6-4 one way or the other, I was more than happy to be part of that kind of game and I found it to be exciting myself. So, because we were also trying to really become a respectable organization, I think all of us were so committed to that and many of us had come from franchises that had had great success like Wayne, **Mike Krushelnyski**, **Marty [McSorley]** — these guys coming from Edmonton — and then bringing in **Jari [Kurri]**, **Paul Coffey**, some of the old Oilers coming in and you also had **Steve Kasper** coming in from Boston, myself from the Islanders. A lot of people came that weren't satisfied with just being in L.A. and having a really good life off the ice. We wanted to win and to do that, we had to be extremely committed away from the rink because of one of the things I always said about playing in L.A.: It can be a tough city with all of the distractions, and I mean that in a good way. If you have young children, you have all the theme parks — they're exciting to go to — you have the beaches, you have golf, you have all sorts of these outdoor activities that, although they're really fantastic, they do distract you if you allow it to become that. Furthermore, when we played there and Wayne was our teammate, we were invited to a lot of really cool things away from the rink. So, if you allowed that to be a distraction, it could be, so I know how focused I tried to remain on the game.

Then, finally when you get to 92-93, we were a team that just hired this brand new coach who was very charismatic, really good-looking guy, **Barry Melrose**. He suited the Hollywood theme, I guess you can say, in hockey in L.A. and in California and we got off to a great start even though Wayne was injured in the beginning part of that year, which was something that was really important for all of us to grow from and we had high expectations of ourselves even with Wayne out of the lineup. But unfortunately for us, our team completely

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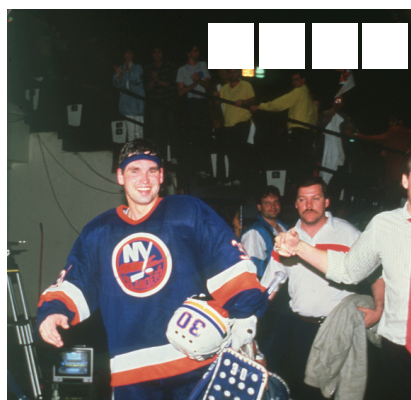


Toronto Star  
Dick Loek

disappeared for about two months from around Dec. 4 or so until the end of January. So, I've always said this after going through it, that I owe everything to Barry Melrose and [then-assistant coach] **Cap Raeder** for sticking with me through some very trying times and even though we had to go with **Robb Stauber** and **Rick Knickle** for stretches because I was so terrible, they worked with me and got me back to being a good NHL goalie again. Ultimately, I think because all my teammates saw how Barry stuck with me, it formed this trust that we had in each other and so we just played extremely well in the playoffs and unfortunately lost four games in a row in the Finals versus Montreal and that was our undoing. But for the most part, I think we really captivated the hockey world because of our run and the popularity of our team.

**MW: I have to ask you about the blue bandanna. How did the tradition start? For one thing, you inspired my brother to wear one of his own when he was a goaltender.**

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Bruce Bennett | B Bennett

**KR:** So, you go back to my days with the Islanders and even growing up, I always had long hair and I wore contacts when I played. So, the combination—anyone who has ever worn contacts when playing sports, sweat is really bothersome, especially for a guy like me because I really perspire heavily, so there was always an issue of keeping the sweat out of my eyes and it seems like it's moved my contacts around a little bit. So, my whole thing was that I was always trying to find something that was a headband that was really absorbent, and the ones you could buy in the sports stores did the job but they weren't perfect. So, I kept searching, tried different things. Then, one day

at practice with the Islanders, I thought, "Hey, you know what? I'm just going to cut up the T-shirts that we wear underneath our equipment," and those I found to be pretty absorbent and, much to my surprise, when I tied this bandanna around my head, I had found it to be the most absorbent thing I had used. So, it was based on something that simple and over the course of time, especially when I moved to Los Angeles, it became sort of a trademark of mine. It was not intended to be that but at some point, and I can't remember what year, but I remember sitting at home in the summer and going into another season, I'd have a discussion with some of my family members I had been visiting in western Canada and I said something about— just casually mentioning, "Yeah, maybe I won't wear the headband this year," and they basically stopped the conversation and said, "No, no, you have to keep wearing it. It's a trademark," so even though I didn't like it near the end, I stuck with it basically because people identified with me with that headband.

**MW: From Gretzky's injury to Luc Robitaille to stepping up his game to the controversial conference final against the Leafs, tell us all about the 1992-93 season and especially Game 7 in Toronto.**

KR: Well, Game 7 in Toronto was a very emotional game because I recall getting ready before the game and I was a guy that had to stretch a lot — most goalies will tell you the same thing — but on a game day, I would stretch between 8 and 10 times throughout the course of the day leading up to and including after warmups because it was such an important part of my game. I felt that I was a guy who played the game with a lot of athleticism so I had to make sure that I was stretched out extremely well and I didn't ever want to have any excuse to play poorly because I didn't put in the time to stretch properly. So, any of my teammates will tell you that I had a really exhaustive stretching exercise or regimen going for every single game, and I was so much so that I had a full sweat going even before warmups started. So, stretching was more like a yoga-type session, so it was really important.

But the reason I bring that up is because I was doing my stretching outside the dressing room because the dressing room in **Maple Leaf Gardens** was so small and I recall thinking, "Boy, this is a dream come true," so while growing up in Edmonton, we'd watch **Hockey Night in Canada** every single Saturday and the games were from either the Montreal Forum or the Toronto Maple Leaf Gardens. So, it's quite an experience now to be thinking, "Oh my gosh, Game 7 in Maple Leaf Gardens."

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It really doesn't get any better or more unique or special than that feeling because that's what we do when we're doing when we're playing as kids: dreaming it's Game 7 in one of those two historic buildings. So, to now have Game 7, the winner gets to go play in the Stanley Cup Final, a chance to win that Cup that we have all been dreaming about winning. I was also lucky enough to be in one of the best spots in the entire building to watch Wayne Gretzky in what he says is maybe the best game of his career that night and to see that unique skill that he had come shining through that night, scoring a hat-trick and doing it with his dad there, who had been having some health issues, and to see— to be lucky enough to get a glimpse of Wayne scoring his hat-trick goal on that bench and he made that very familiar gesture across the ice to his dad. It was even very emotional for me. I had to gather myself because I didn't want to get too caught up in it and I thought, "Okay Kelly, just concentrate. You have three-and-a-half minutes to protect a two-goal lead," then [then-Leafs defenseman] **Dave Ellett** scored with, I think, around 40 seconds to go to make it a one-goal game and then it was a nail-biter after that and we hung on.

Afterwards, though, **Luc Robitaille** and I had this celebration on the ice and I can't share with you the words I said to Luc because it's not appropriate for families to listen to. But, you can imagine us yelling at how we're going to the Stanley Cup Final and the sheer joy and the look of excitement we both shared was very cool, very unique, and we've talked about it since and it was a really cool moment between us.



**MW:** Your coach for the majority of your time on Long Island was the late, great Al Arbour. In Los Angeles, while they didn't have quite the same lineage as Mr. Arbour, you played under some quality coaches in Robbie Ftorek, Tom Webster and Barry Melrose. Describe the contrast in coaching styles between the three. Which coach did you benefit most from and how?

**KR:** I have to say this because this is really important: I was spoiled, and I know it, because when I first joined the **National Hockey League**, my first coach was **Al Arbour** and everybody around the hockey world knows how he was such an incredible coach, but to all of us that ever played under Al, I think— I'm sure you've watched the reactions from all of us when Al passed away that we were— I guess the best way to put it is heartbroken. He was a guy that although he knew he had to be tough at times and he could really drive you to get the best out of you, we all knew that he deeply cared about all of us — and that was the thing I've always said about Al, or even the best coaches I've had, that they can be tough on you but at the end of the day, when I put my head on the pillow and I feel that my coach really care about me, I feel that those are the best coaches because they will get the best of their players. I mean you can tell me what you think but it's hard to describe how the best coaches are able to do that and how they make you know that they care about you.

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So, I was very fortunate to have Al and maybe it's not fair because I compare every other coach I've had in the NHL to Al and what Al would have done under these circumstances, in this situation how Al would have handled it. I don't think that's necessarily the best way to measure people because he's one of the all-time best.

Having said that, I think I learned something from everybody and I'm not just trying to be politically correct here but I've been very fortunate.

I didn't have **Robbie Ftorek** for a long time but I really enjoyed how he coached. I thought I had a real good relationship with him; the same with **Tom Webster**. Tom was the guy that really added a lot of structure to our team and he knew that, although we had a really high-powered offensive team and we liked to play that way, he got us to play with a little more defensive posturing and more trying to recognize that while it's great to go on the offense, you have to be prepared to play some defense here as well. Then Barry, of course, I mentioned earlier that he had such a great impact in my career and in my life because just when I needed it most, when I thought my career was disappearing and my time in the NHL was coming to an abrupt end, he stepped in and he found me the helped I needed off the ice to get me back on track and for that, like I said, I'm forever indebted to Barry and Cap [Raeder] for that.

So, my time in L.A. was a real joy for the people I worked with. I have to mention also that **Bruce McNall** was also a fantastic influence on my life, Rogie Vachon was too — people that really connected with me.

**MW: Your final season with the Kings came in 1995-96 which, for all intents and purposes, was a transitional year for the club. From trading Gretzky to ownership issues, the Kings certainly didn't have their greatest year. Describe what that season was like, especially only a few years removed from the club's Finals run. Were you hoping to remain with the Kings or, at that juncture, was it time to move on?**

**KR:** That was a strange year. We were a team that, after we went to the Stanley Cup Final, was a core group that never made the playoffs again. I think all of us had a really hard time coming to grips with that. We got off to a great start the following season — 93-94 — but I'm not sure exactly why we never got back on track. We lost a few on an extended road trip and from there on, it was just a battle. I'm not sure if it was the Stanley Cup hangover, the extra hockey that a lot of the guys had been playing or just trying to recapture something instead of creating a new feeling with still a really good quality team. I mean we still had really good players and everybody was just as driven but we just couldn't find it collectively, and so moving forward, I guess the organization — and rightfully so — had no choice but to start making some changes because it wasn't working with us anymore. But it was really— for most of us that have been there for that Stanley Cup run, a really sad time when Wayne [Gretzky] was traded to St. Louis. I know I was really upset by the trade. You never think that Wayne will be traded elsewhere. I didn't. I hoped that wasn't going to be the case but the organization felt otherwise and they had to move forward for the future and they did. So, not only did they trade Wayne but **Tony [Granato]** was not going to come back at the end of the year, they got rid of Jari [Kurri], Marty McSorley. There were a lot of players that were leaving and myself, I was going to be gone at the end of the season and I knew it. In February of that year, I put my house up for sale because it was pretty obvious to me that the team was not interested in having me back.

So, when it comes to an end and you've had some good times, it's definitely sad. I mean that's the best way that I can put it. Nobody wants to be a part of the problem, so unfortunately we weren't winning anymore, so the team had no choice but to make some changes.

**MW: On March 9, 2013, you were honored by the Kings as part of their Legends Night series. Describe how those events were. How did you react when you first found out you were going to be christened as a KIngs Legend and how was the ceremony for you and your family?**

Well, this was a very special process if you want to call it that.

Earlier that summer, in 2012, Luc Robitaille approached me and he mentioned what he was doing and I was aware of this Kings Legends program he started and I thought this was such a cool thing, and I loved the idea that Luc was starting to bring back some of the history or some of the tradition and to really celebrate some of



the players that had such an impact on the Los Angeles Kings organization during their time in the National Hockey League.

When he mentioned that he wanted to have me as one of the Kings Legends the following season, I mean I was– boy, I was through-the-roof excited and it was one of the most exciting days I had in such a long, long time. It was nervewracking leading up to it because I was aware of the ceremony and what happens, speaking in front of all the fans at the **STAPLES Center**.

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I think the thing that makes it so unique or so special is that the older you get, the more reflective you become. You start to think back upon your experiences and who helped you, who guided you, who did you share all this with. So, although I wasn't able to convey all that during my time on the ice, because I only had three or five minutes but I certainly need an hour to talk about everybody that has meant so much to me during our time with the Kings, I wanted everybody to know how I felt, and Luc just handled it so right. I mean he flies your whole family down, they take really good care of you, they make you feel like something really special and the Kings remember your importance to the organization at the time.

It's one of my fondest memories about my time with the Kings and my involvement with that organization.

#### Kelly Hrudey SportsCenter Commercial



Kelly Hrudey would go on to play **360 regular-season games** for the Kings. Over that span, he would amass a record of 145-135-55 while registering a 3.47 goals-against average, an .896 save percentages and 10 shutouts. Yet, while he did finish his playing career with the rival **San Jose Sharks**, Hrudey is no less revered in Los Angeles today than he was during his playing days. He was a regular fixture during the early- to mid-1990's for the Kings, being a competitor on the ice and a great guy off the ice, connecting with fans whether they had been new to the game or they had been following the team since their inception nearly two decades prior.

Following his retirement in 1998, Hrudey joined **CBC's 'Hockey Night in Canada'** on a full-time basis after serving as a playoff analyst during the latter part of his playing career. Hrudey has remained with HNIC ever since becoming, in some respects, more famous for that than his playing career with the Kings. Hrudey's objective analysis has even garnered the respect of many for his work as a broadcaster.

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From his flashy moves during a game to that famous light-blue bandanna to that flowing hair that seemed to fit the Los Angeles culture, Kelly Hrudey and the Kings went hand-in-hand in the 1990's.

Today, more than 20 years later, the former netminder remains justifiably — and fondly — remembered for his contributions to the Los Angeles Kings. That is especially the case given that No. 32 — currently worn by **Jonathan Quick** — is just as, if not more, associated with Hrudey, and why not? With all of the success he brought to the Kings organization during his playing career, it is the very least that Kelly Hrudey deserves.

*\*Special thanks to Meghann Cox and Jeff Duarte for helping making this interview possible.*