

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM ROMAN VOPAT

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 February 24, 2017



Image credit: Ryan Cowley Original photo credit: A Foxhall

Few seasons were more transitional for the Los Angeles Kings than 1995-96.

Just three seasons after reaching the Stanley Cup Final, the Kings had spent the campaign making a slew of changes, trading the likes of **Marty McSorley** and **Darryl Sydor** while letting **Tony Granato** and **Kelly Hradey** leave via free agency. Among those to leave Los Angeles that season, though, none was more noteworthy than arguably the game's greatest player.

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On February 27, 1996, nearly eight years after his arrival generated a whole new level of excitement in southern California, **Wayne Gretzky** was traded from the Kings to the St. Louis Blues in a deal that saw the silver-and-black receive three players and a pair of draft picks in return. One of those players was a sizeable center from Litvinov, Czech Republic by the name of **Roman Vopat**.

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After being drafted in the seventh round by St. Louis in 1994, Vopat would make the Blues in 1995-96 where he played in 25 games, scoring two goals and adding three assists during that time. But it was that late February morning in 1996 when Vopat, along with **Craig Johnson** and **Patrice Tardif**, were set to help begin the post-Gretzky era in the City of Angels.

In this week's edition of **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'**, Anna Bittner and I speak to Roman Vopat who shares with us his feelings on being traded to the Kings, the pressure that came



with being acquired for Gretzky and the opportunity to play alongside his older brother, **Jan**. Mr. Vopat is also known for scoring the first Kings goal in Frozen Fury history, although he may or may not recall said moment.

Nevertheless, this is Roman Vopat.

Scott Walker vs Roman Vopat



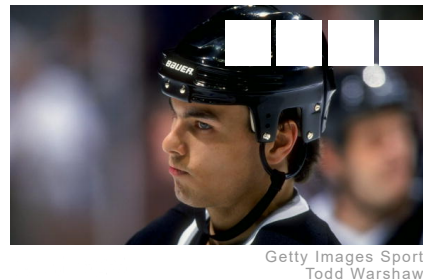
Make Way for the Kings: Your trade to the Kings in early 1996 signaled a new era in Los Angeles as you were one of the key players traded from St. Louis for Wayne Gretzky. Upon your arrival to Los Angeles, how were you treated and what was the overall atmosphere like?

Roman Vopat: Well, I was treated like royalty pretty much. The L.A. Kings was and still is a first-class organization starting from the ownership with **Mr. [Philip] Anschutz**. Then you had a general manager, **Dave Taylor** back then, so I was treated like every other player, with the respect and it was unbelievable actually. I had fun in L.A. I was young, I was 21 years old and it was living the dream to play in Los Angeles.

MW: Did you feel any added pressure knowing you were one of the players traded for Gretzky or did the Kings make you feel comfortable as you got used to your new team?

RV: I felt a lot of pressure. I always put a lot of pressure on myself personally. Embed from Getty Images

Being traded for the best player to ever play the game, it was tough. L.A. Kings fans expected a lot from me after the trade and I don't think the trade worked out as well for the Kings as they were hoping. Me personally, I didn't live up to the expectations. Like I said, I was young and immature, made a lot of mistakes and that's when I retired and why I got into coaching. I didn't want kids who were my age making the same mistakes I did.



MW: In September 1997, you were part of the inaugural Frozen Fury game in Las Vegas where you also scored the first Kings goal. What do you remember most about that first Frozen Fury game and how was it scoring your team's first goal?

RV: Well, I don't really recall the goal to be honest with you *laughs* but I enjoyed the experience. Again, it was the first time [for the Frozen Fury] and to play against Colorado and play against such good players like **Patrick Roy** and **Joe Sakic** and **[Peter] Forsberg**. It was incredible and you mentioned I scored a goal and that I don't even remember *laughs* but I think I actually remember I fought with **Eric Lacroix**, so that's a thing that actually stuck in my mind. It was really a great experience. The fans were fantastic. There were a lot of fans from L.A., a lot of fans from Colorado and yeah, it was a great experience.

MW: For parts of two seasons with the Kings, you had the opportunity to play alongside your older brother, Jan. While being teammates with a family member would certainly be exciting, it is nonetheless rare. How did you feel having your brother as a teammate?

RV: Oh, it was incredible. My brother was always a better player and he was a defenseman. I was a forward. He kind of relieved a bit of the pressure on me now that the eyes were on both of us. Now, the eyes were on him most of the time because he was playing more regularly than I was. But, it was definitely easier; easier on him, easier on me. He had a family, so I enjoyed the time with my brother and I wish it would've lasted longer but that's part of the game and part of the business.



MW: After retiring from professional hockey in 2011, you became an assistant coach; first with the WHL's Prince George Cougars in 2014 and this season with the Kootenay Ice. Tell us about your career behind the bench thus far and what do you feel you bring to the table as a coach?

RV: Well, it's a great experience. It's something new, it's— you know, I played professional hockey for 16 years, with a lot of years in Europe, so that's why I try to bring to the table. I relate to the players, I know what they

want to accomplish. I played at the highest level possible and like I said before, I don't want [my players] to make the same mistakes I made. They're young, they're teenagers, there's a lot of obstacles on the way to making it to the National Hockey League and not everyone makes it — only a small percentage of players to make the NHL — but when you see a player actually accomplish that dream, it makes you feel good because you were a part of the process to help him achieve his goal. But, I'm coaching for three years and I learn every day. There's something new literally every day helping along with great coaches like [former Prince George Cougars coach] **Mark Holick**, who was a pro coach with the **Anaheim Ducks**, so those two years in Prince George helped me tremendously, to help me understand the game, understand the players and kind of pointed me to the right direction in how to approach the game and how to help the players achieve their goal.

Roman Vopat vs. Eric Lacroix 97-98 PS

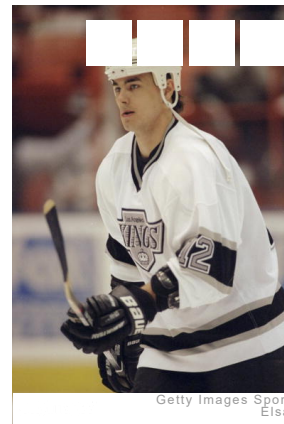


In parts of three seasons with the Kings, Roman Vopat would score four goals and eight assists while amassing 121 penalty minutes. In fact, many of those penalty minutes came from dropping the gloves — an area where the 6-foot-3 former center found success in. Yet, while his offensive numbers certainly weren't anything to write home about, Vopat, as mentioned earlier, later became a coach to make sure his players didn't make the same mistakes he made during his playing career.



Admittedly young and immature, Vopat knew that he could have given more as a player, although he was more successful playing in Europe following his NHL career. Still, Roman Vopat is happy in his current role, serving as an assistant coach for the **Kootenay Ice** of the **Western Hockey League** where he plays an integral part in helping to develop the stars of tomorrow.

To some, he may be known simply as one of the three players who was traded for Wayne Gretzky. To others, though, and more importantly, Roman Vopat is a symbol of a player who, despite his struggles on the ice, never gave up off it.



His playing career lasted 16 years but it is behind the bench where Roman Vopat is finding a new level of success as a coach and as a mentor for those young players who aspire to, one day, play in the National Hockey League just like he did.

In spite of his brief tenure with the club, Roman Vopat only has the greatest things to say about the Los Angeles Kings organization and, from what a pleasure he was to speak with, the Kings should feel fortunate to have had Mr. Vopat suit up for their team, especially during such a transitional time.

**Special thanks to my assistant and friend, Anna Bittner, for helping me conduct this interview. Additionally, thank you to Mr. Vopat for taking time out of his busy schedule to speak with us and share his experiences and to Don MacMillan and the media department of the Kootenay Ice organization for allowing us the opportunity for this interview.*