

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM MATHIEU SCHNEIDER

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 February 1, 2017



Image credit: Ryan Cowley Original photo credit: Andrew D. Bernstein

As memorable as their playoff run in 1993 was, the **Los Angeles Kings** would have to wait eight more years to witness their next postseason series victory. For many, though, it was worth the wait as the Kings entered the 2001 playoffs with, if you will, a new lease on life.

While the trading of **Rob Blake** to the **Colorado Avalanche** may have signified a new direction for the team, the acquisition of **Adam Deadmarsh** in said trade proved that the Kings were ready to win right away. After all, they already had a plethora of talent from **Ziggy Palffy** and **Jozef Stumpel** to established veterans like **Luc Robitaille** and a seasoned defenseman by the name of **Mathieu Schneider**.

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While he may not have been as established in Los Angeles as, say, the aforementioned Robitaille, Mathieu Schneider nonetheless brought with him a wealth of experience to the west coast when he signed with the Kings in 2000.

Schneider was born on June 12, 1969 in New York City. However, Schneider, who became a hockey fan at a very early age, did not grow up as a fan of his hometown **Rangers** or even the nearby **Islanders**. Instead,



Schneider was a fan of the team that ultimately drafted him, the **Montreal Canadiens**.

Both being French-Canadian, Schneider's parents were fans of the Habs, so it was only natural for the younger Schneider — one of 12 children in the family — to follow suit.

"My dad stuck me in a Canadiens jersey when I was four years old," Schneider told me of how his hockey allegiance started. However, the first hockey game Schneider did go to was at **Madison Square Garden** to watch the hometown Rangers, which he told me he would choose to root for over the Islanders.

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As mentioned, Schneider would be drafted by the Canadiens (44th overall in 1987) before establishing himself as a reliable point man, helping the Habs win the **Stanley Cup** in 1993. However, after stints with the Islanders, **Maple Leafs** and Rangers, Schneider would join the Kings in the summer of 2000 where he really began to establish himself as a solid two-way blueliner, pitching in much more on the defensive side.

In his maiden season in Los Angeles, Schneider would score 16 goals and 35 assists before helping the Kings pull off an opening-round upset of the **Detroit Red Wings** in the 2001 playoffs. Schneider notched nine assists that postseason as the Kings fell just one game short of their first Conference Final berth since 1993.

In his nearly three full seasons with the Kings, Schneider helped solidify a defensive corps that may not have been the most daunting on paper. With the void left by Rob Blake's departure, Schneider was the veteran leader on the Kings blueline, being supported by the likes of **Philippe Boucher**, **Aaron Miller** and **Lubomir Visnovsky**.

In this week's edition of **Make Way's 'Royal Reflections'**, we speak with Mathieu Schneider who discusses the Kings' aforementioned playoff upset of the Red Wings in 2001, the infamous injury bug that plagued his team during his time in Los Angeles and even how it felt to return to southern California in 2007, albeit with the rival **Anaheim Ducks**.

This is Mathieu Schneider's story.

Mathieu Schneider Goal - Kings 1 Canes 0 - 02.07.02

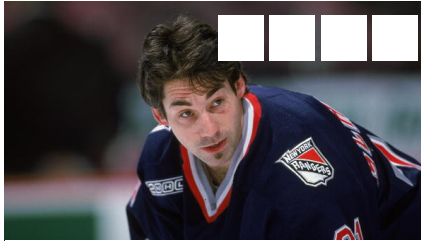


Make Way for the Kings: You joined the Kings in the summer of 2000 after spending the previous two seasons with your hometown Rangers, but after being claimed in the expansion draft by Columbus. Could you describe the situation that led you to Los Angeles? What was it about the Kings that interested you to sign?

Mathieu Schneider: Yeah, the couple years I spent in New York, we had some really good teams. It was veteran team. My first year in New York was [Wayne Gretzky's] last year. We had guys like John MacLean and [former King] Kevin Stevens, obviously Brian Leetch was still there and Jeff Beukeboom. I think we had a really solid team but it was disappointing when we missed the playoffs both years I was there by a couple of points and I think everyone was disappointed. Then, right towards the end there when John Muckler got fired and Neil Smith got fired [as head coach and general manager respectively] on the same day, and I think there were probably seven or eight games left in the season when John Tortorella took over the team and they started a big transition there in New York. But, as much fun as it was playing with all of those guys, it was a tough couple of years because we didn't have the success on the ice that everyone hoped we would have, and I became a

free agent that summer. That was the summer of 2000 and that was the year I ended up signing with the Kings.

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I went through that summer, talked to a handful of teams, but I had been talking to Rob Blake and Luc Robitaille on and off in the summer and [my agent] Pat Brisson was basically doing the deal for me out there. The deal didn't get done until sometime in August but it was a more bonus-heavy contract, I guess. But looking back, it was really the change I needed in my career and I was looking forward to going [to Los Angeles]. I think [the Kings], at the time, I want to say they finished with 90-something points the year before and they were kind of a very underrated team that just flew under the radar. No real superstars other than maybe Luc and they were just starting the transition as well of coming into their own.

MW: In your first season with the Kings, you scored 51 points in 73 games before helping your team upset the heavily-favoured Red Wings that postseason. Already established as a veteran and a reliable playmaker, how do you feel the Kings benefited from your contributions? Better yet, how do you feel you benefitted with the Kings?

MS: Well, I look back on that season and I think that was really—that was a turnaround season for me, there's no question about it. It was about roughly my 10th year in the league and for me, getting a fresh start was key. I hadn't played much in the **Western Conference** aside from my two years here in Toronto and we didn't have a great team here in Toronto either. But, I think being in the Western Conference was more of a free-flowing skating game that helped me an awful lot. Then, I alluded to it earlier, but the cast of characters, an interesting mix of guys that were underrated, I think, for the most part and I just seemed to be a good fit [in Los Angeles]. I think back to guys like **Bryan Smolinski** – people that were good friends – **Glen Murray**, Jozef Stumpel, all tremendous professionals, tremendous players, and we just had a really good team chemistry. **Kelly Buchberger** was another guy that really flew under the radar, and we had a tough team and a great group of guys that really enjoyed playing together.

MW: What was the atmosphere in the locker room and on the ice like before and after the Rob Blake trade? As valuable as Deadmarsh and Miller proved to be, losing a player of Blake's calibre must have

been a major adjustment. Is that accurate?

MS: That was a tough trade for everyone. For me personally, it was difficult because Rob was instrumental in helping to get me to L.A. and even though we weren't partners, we played together on the power play and once in a while, we played together 5-on-5, but for the most part, we were very good friends, we had trained together in the summer for a few years — Glen Murray was a part of that group as well. [Blake's trade] was extremely difficult on the guys who had been there for a longer period of time mainly because of the type of person that Rob was. He was definitely the leader of that group and he had been there for the longest stretch, outside of Luc, of anyone who had been there, and he was just an important part of the identity of that team at the time. But, I think the players we got in that trade, especially Adam Deadmarsh, helped with that transition because he came in and was immediately a leader and I think helped fill a void that was missing on the team. But, at the same time, it was a difficult time all around for a lot of guys there that were very close to Rob.

MW: As talented as the Kings were during the early 2000's, they were notorious for the amount of man-games lost to injury. You were limited to 55 games in 2001-02 but the team lost 536 man-games to injury the following season, which was your last with the Kings. Could you describe the state of team morale during that time? How did you and even some of the younger guys deal with the changes?

MS: Well, it goes back to one of my original thoughts on how guys for the most part there, it was an interesting mix of guys that were really, in my opinion, underrated.

What [then-Kings head coach] **Andy Murray** was able to do was help guys buy into a system and we had a hard-working group and I think, in the end, we were able to piece things together. But, they were certainly difficult times. I actually remember the time you were talking about. I had sports-hernia surgery. It was a difficult time. It was an Olympic year and I was looking forward to the Olympics that year and I ended up having surgery in—I want to say it was early November. But, I had surgery and it kept me out through Christmas.

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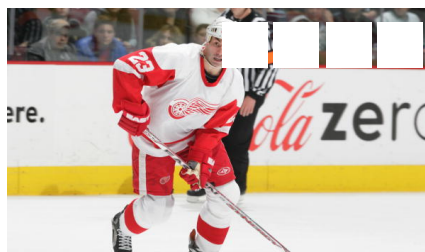
We just kept playing together and it kept us in the [playoff] picture. I know we ended up having a run at the end of that season that got us into the playoffs when things got down to the bitter end of that season. We always stayed right there in the mix and I really do think a lot of it is because we had so many players that were fighting to stay in the league, fighting to stay relevant. It really was interesting mix. I don't think I've ever played on another team quite like this. There wasn't really one superstar that stood out; there wasn't one superstar that carried the team on his back. I think back to a guy like Ziggy Palffy who, in my opinion, was one of the top five guys I ever played with but not necessarily on the top line on a regular basis. He was just—every single night, consistently putting up points on the board no matter who he played with. He ended up being a great fit with Deadmarsh and whoever else played with him.

That was just the type of group that it was. We hung in and didn't let all the injuries get anyone down and just went about business, night-in and night-out. It was challenging – there's no question – but goaltending, I remember **Felix [Potvin]** came in for that run and, of course, at the end of that year when we lost to Colorado in seven games. But, Felix had a bit of a resurgence there as well and I thought he did a tremendous job. When he was called upon, he was always there and he was another guy that teammates loved and loved to play in front of.

MW: Late in the 2002-03, you were traded to the Detroit Red Wings. Describe your feelings on being traded. How did you feel leaving the Kings and better yet, how was it to join the Red Wings?

MS: Well, you know, it was an interesting time and looking back, there wasn't much real direction with the organization at the time. Luc [Robitaille] had been traded or signed as a free agent in Detroit the year before, {Rob Blake} was traded, so it was certainly an interesting time there. I think that, at the time, a lot of guys on the team thought that we were one or two players away from being a contender, the team was going the opposite way and trying to rebuild and trying to change the makeup of the team, it did make it difficult.

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Jeff Vinnick

Because of those reasons, it was much easier to understand that I was being traded potentially and I did end up being traded the day of the deadline — Bryan Smolinski as well, who was another big part of that team. So,

[the Kings] were sellers at the deadline, they weren't looking to get better, so that made it a lot easier to move on.

Then, going to Detroit, obviously having won before, realizing the chance to be part of a great team, a great organization, I had a lot of friends there. **Chris Chelios** had been a friend for a long, long time, **Brett Hull** was there, Luc was there. Actually, Luc used to joke about being the oldest guy on the team in L.A. to being right in the middle of the pack and I was one of the younger guys in Detroit *laughs*. So, that was kind of fun. It was just- going to Detroit was another great thing to happen in my career. It helped me to have the strong second half of my career that I did. I loved Detroit. I really, truly loved Detroit. My time in L.A. was special but I really, truly loved Detroit.

MW: In 2007-08, you returned to southern California but with the Anaheim Ducks. How was that season overall and how did you enjoy being back in SoCal?

MS: It was interesting. Anaheim was a unique opportunity for a number of reasons.

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One, we never sold our house in L.A. and we still have it to this day, so we were able to move home where all four kids were born, which was nice. Then, they had a great team. They beat us in Detroit the year before and so I went there with **Todd Bertuzzi**, who was a close friend of mine as well, and overall that year, it was a disappointment because I think we really underachieved as a team. I thought we had a very special group of guys there.

But, playing in southern California, as I imagine playing anywhere in California, is pretty special. But, the thing that you really enjoy about playing out there is that the fans are tremendous and showing up at the games- you go to a game in Anaheim, you go to a game in L.A., you might think you're in a Canadian city in one of those arenas with the way they embrace hockey. You leave the rink, you walk out into the sunshine and it's like medicine for you. No matter what's going on at the rink, you can leave it at the rink and you can leave your

work at work. But, it's really interesting after playing in so many different markets and so many different cities. It's an advantage playing in California and I think guys have really enjoyed that. I know I've really enjoyed that.

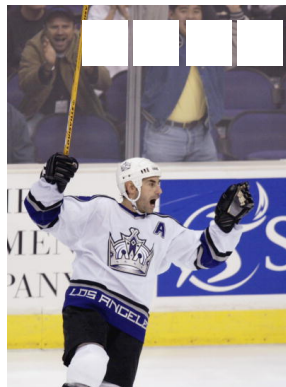
But even though it was a very good year on the ice, we lost to Dallas that year and I thought we were a better team, no question. In the playoffs, I thought we could have definitely contended for the Stanley Cup that year but- I look back on that year fondly. I had some great friends on that team and it was a special team.

Mathieu Schneider Speech Upon Induction into U.S. Hockey Hall of Fame



When he retired in 2010, Mathieu Schneider finished his NHL career having been a two-time All-Star while collecting 743 points (223 goals, 520 assists) in 1,289 games. In fact, Schneider is **also among** the top five American defensemen of all-time in nearly every statistical category, including third in games played, fifth in points, fourth in goals as well as third and fourth in power play goals and game-winning goals with 100 and 36 respectively. Schneider even donned his country's jersey on four separate occasions, most notably helping Team USA win the inaugural World Cup of Hockey in 1996.

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In 2015, Schneider was **deservedly enshrined** into the **United States Hockey Hall of Fame** where he went in with 2015 **Hockey Hall of Fame** inductee **Angelo Ruggerio**, former NHLer **Chris Drury** and builder **Ron DeGregorio**.

Mathieu Schneider would end up playing for 10 different NHL teams and even had the opportunity to return to his boyhood team, the Canadiens, during the 2008-09 season. However, it was Schneider's contributions to the Los Angeles Kings that showed many what the blueliner was capable of as both a defensive presence and as a leader. Schneider would **go on to play** 193 games for the Kings, tallying 37 goals and 87 assists for 124 points along the way.

Schneider now works for the **NHLPA** where, since February 2011, he has been the Special Assistant to the Executive Director, **Donald Fehr**.

A veteran of 20 NHL seasons and one of the greatest American defensemen of all-time, Mathieu Schneider has earned his place in hockey lore and along the way, helped transform the Los Angeles Kings into a formidable force in the early 2000's.

Mr. Schneider, this one's for you.