

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM CHRIS KONTOS

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 February 21, 2017

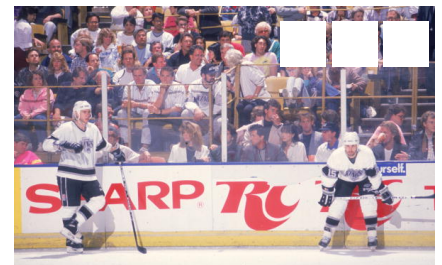


Image credit: Ryan Cowley

The 1988-89 season brought a new look to the **Los Angeles Kings**. With the acquisition of arguably the game's greatest player in **Wayne Gretzky**, the Kings did away with their traditional forum-blue-and-gold uniforms and went the same route as the NFL's Raiders, sporting the always-intimidating silver-and-black. But Gretzky and the new uniforms weren't the only highlights of the Kings' 1988-89 season. **Bernie Nicholls**, for instance, would score a career-high 70 goals and the Kings would go on to upset the defending **Stanley Cup** champion, **Edmonton Oilers**, in a hard-fought opening-round playoff series. Yet, while both Gretzky and Nicholls played pivotal roles in said playoff win, the Kings had some help from an unsung hero that spring.

After playing just six games for the Kings the previous season, **Chris Kontos** had played in just seven during the 1988-89 regular season, rejoining the club after spending much of the campaign playing in Switzerland. But Kontos's arrival could not have come at a better time.

Embed from Getty Images



Bruce Bennett | B Bennett

Despite facing off against the defending champions, though, the Kings were given higher expectations entering the 1989 playoffs.

Going from 14th overall the previous season to 4th in addition to being led by Gretzky and Nicholls, the Kings were no longer an underdog team. Inexperienced, yes, but they were nonetheless expected to make the next step, and thanks to Kontos's contributions, which included goals in six of the seven games that series, the Kings did just that.



In this edition of **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'**, **Anna Bittner** and I speak with Mr. Kontos about that memorable playoff series versus the Oilers, how he felt about coming to Los Angeles from the **Pittsburgh Penguins** the previous year and even where playing for the Kings ranks on his career achievements.

This, ladies and gentleman, is Chris Kontos.

Chris Kontos 1989 Playoff Goal Scoring Record - LA Kings



Make Way for the Kings: In February 1988, the Pittsburgh Penguins traded you to the Los Angeles Kings. Could you describe your feelings on being traded to the Kings? What was the feeling like when the Kings acquired Wayne Gretzky later that summer both personally and for the team?

Chris Kontos: So, when I was with Pittsburgh, I was sent down to the minors for a couple of weeks and then to get traded to the west coast was exciting because, at that time, hockey [in the west] was very high-scoring, lots of offense and it was exciting to get to move to somewhere where they wanted you, so, I was very excited to go there. I finished my season [in Los Angeles] and I had a six-point game against Chicago — a goal and five assists — and I had 12 points in six games by the time [the Kings] had called me up, so they thought I was pretty good. I was very excited.



The next year, I went to Switzerland because I came back after the season and rejoined the Kings. My first encounter [with the Kings] was when I wore the yellow-and-purple which, to this day, I still have not found one picture of me in, but I was there and I wish I had a photo. Anyway, when I got back [to Los Angeles], I ended up playing the rest of the season and went into the playoffs against Edmonton, which was very exciting because Gretzky had left Edmonton for L.A. and there was a lot of excitement and a lot of stars who came to the game. Hockey was really exciting in California at that time.

As for Gretzky, it was unbelievable. I mean that was the guy that was supposed to be untradeable. I was in Switzerland at the time but I still watched the Kings. I didn't come back until February or March, whenever the [trade] deadline was, that's when I re-signed after I finished in Switzerland when I rejoined the Kings.

MW: Speaking of Gretzky, you were his favourite target in the 1989 playoffs as you went on to score nine goals in 11 games, helping the Kings eliminate the defending champion Edmonton Oilers in a memorable seven-game series. As best as you can, describe what factored in to your offensive explosion that spring?

CK: I don't know. I think it was just a— you know, no matter who you put with Gretzky, I think there's always ample opportunity to get points or score. He's so smart and his vision was incredible on the ice. So, for me, I was at the top of my game coming back from Europe and being able to play, knowing that the hockey world was watching that series and it was an exciting time and I was just fortunate enough to get hot.

MW: In a professional career that lasted 16 years, you made a number of stops along the way, including playing for the expansion Tampa Bay Lightning and for Canada's national team. Where does playing for the Kings rank and how would you compare it to other clubs?

CK: Well, playing in Los Angeles was one of my favourite places. I also played in Tampa and I loved playing in warm weather *laughs* as a Canadian living through Canadian winters my whole life. To get outside in shorts and a T-shirt after practice is a privileged thing and I loved playing [in Los Angeles].

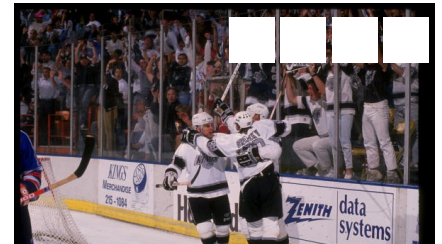
Chris Kontos 4 goals in first Tampa Bay Lightning game



After losing Game 1 to the Oilers in their 1989 opening-round series, the Los Angeles Kings would receive plenty of support from Chris Kontos in Game 2 who scored a hat-trick en route to his team's 5-2 win. Yet, while the Kings were on the short end of a 3-1 series deficit, Kontos nonetheless remained a force as he would score key goals in each of the series' final three games to cap the Kings' incredible comeback.

While they were swept by the eventual Stanley Cup champion **Calgary Flames** in the next round, the Kings nonetheless rejuvenated an enthusiasm their fanbase hadn't seen since the spring of 1982. Yet, there was something different about the 1988-89 version of this team as the new-look Kings were only scratching the surface of their potential and Kontos was a big part of that early on.

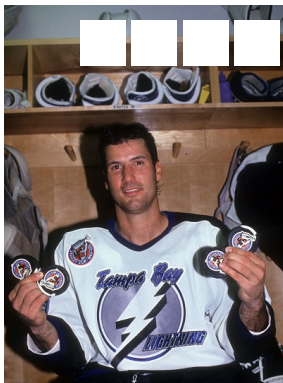
Embed from Getty Images



Getty Images Sport
Mike Powell

Chris Kontos would play just 11 more games for the Kings but regardless, he made his mark on the franchise during the spring of 1989 where he helped the silver-and-black pull off one of their greatest series wins ever.

Embed from Getty Images



Bruce Bennett
B Bennett

Over the span of three seasons with the Kings, Kontos would register 19 points in 19 regular-season games and 11 goals in 20 playoff games with nine of those coming in 1989.

Kontos would become a hockey journeyman, suiting up for the expansion Tampa Bay Lightning where he not only scored the first goal in the franchise's history but potted four that first game and a total of 27 goals and 51 points that first season. In addition, Kontos, a native of Toronto, representing Canada at the 1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway, winning a silver medal.

While his time in Los Angeles was brief, though, Kings fans will always look back on that 1989 playoff upset of the Edmonton Oilers and think of, along with Gretzky and Nicholls, Chris Kontos.

It's quite near impossible not to.

**Special thanks to my assistant and friend, Anna Bittner, for helping me conduct this interview. Additionally, thank you to Mr. Kontos for taking the time to speak with us.*