

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: LA KINGS LEGEND TONY GRANATO

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 July 25, 2016

On January 20, 1990, the **Los Angeles Kings** made an unpopular move by trading away fan favourite — and 70-goal scorer — **Bernie Nicholls** to the **New York Rangers**. Suffice it to say that an enormous amount of pressure would be placed on the players going the opposite way in said deal. Along with **Tomas Sandstrom**, the Rangers also dealt **Tony Granato** to the Kings.

Unfortunately for many Kings fans, however, the disappointment and even anger of losing Nicholls was still very fresh, so it was understandably difficult to see what Sandstrom and Granato brought to the table. Fortunately, though, Kings fans found that out in short time — and they never looked back.

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As part of **Make Way for the Kings'** 'Royal Reflections' series this season, I spoke to the aforementioned Tony Granato about his time in Los Angeles but, more specifically, about the impact he had on his new team in the 1990 playoffs against the defending **Stanley Cup** champion **Calgary Flames**.

I asked Granato what he remembers about first being traded to the Kings.

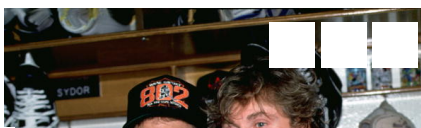
"I remember the day I got traded very well," he said. "It was the All-Star break and there were rumors that the Rangers were interested in Bernie Nicholls, so I knew there was a possibility [of being traded]."

While trades are simply a part of the game, getting dealt to the Kings was the first time that Granato experienced this first-hand. Whatever disappointment Granato felt about being traded, though, was quickly replaced with excitement — the excitement of playing alongside the game's greatest player.

"It's still a shock even though you kind of know it might happen," Granato continued. "But to get the opportunity to go to Los Angeles and play with Wayne Gretzky was the best thing that could've happened to me.

"New York was a great place to play. The Rangers were great organization but the kings were the hot ticket with Wayne just getting to L.A. the year before. I remember how great the fans were and the energy that there was in L.A. for hockey thanks to Wayne."

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Almost immediately upon his arrival, Granato found success with the Kings. In the 19 regular-season games he played to close out the campaign, the native of Downers Grove, Ill., would score five goals and add six assists,





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helping the Kings get into the playoffs. However, while they did qualify for the postseason, Los Angeles's 34-39-7 certainly wasn't anything to write home about. To make matters worse, Granato and the Kings had to open the playoffs against the high-flying Flames who, in addition to being the defending Stanley Cup champions, had swept their rivals from California the previous spring. Up against the likes of **Joe Nieuwendyk**, **Theoren Fleury** and rookie sensation **Sergei Makarov**, the Kings knew that they had their work cut out for them.

"We were definitely the underdogs that year against Calgary," Granato said. "They were favored to not only win our series but the Cup that year."

But despite how daunting the Flames were entering the playoffs that spring, Granato didn't agree with his team's underdog status.

"[The Flames] finished quite a bit higher that year in the regular season," he said. "But no team with Gretzky, Robitaille, Taylor, Blake and a lot of other great players should have ever been considered an underdog."

Nevertheless, the Kings were trying to do what they did one year earlier: ousting the defending champions right off the bat. However, unlike the previous year against the Oilers, the Kings took a 3-1 series lead against the Flames in what was already an offensive clinic of a series.

Through the first four games, the Kings outscored the Flames 24-16, which included a beyond-convincing **12-4 victory** in Game 4. Three different Kings scored hat-tricks that night including one Tony Granato who propelled his team to victory while pushing the Flames to the brink of elimination. However, it was Game 3 where Granato stood out the most.

In a **rare low-scoring** affair, the Kings and Flames needed overtime to settle this one. Tied 1-1 in both the game and the series — and the Kings shorthanded, no less — Granato jumped on a loose puck he had pokechecked into the offensive zone, making no mistake on netminder **Mike Vernon** to win the game for Los Angeles, nearly blowing the roof off of the **Great Western Forum**.

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Tony Granato OT goal - Kings vs Flames - GM3 Smythe...





The Flames took Game 5 by a 5-1 count back in Calgary but the Kings **would finish off** the defending champs in Los Angeles in Game 6 thanks to an odd-looking — but memorable — double-overtime scored by **Mike Krushelnyski**, which was assisted by, in addition to **Steve Duchesne**, Granato.

Of the goal, longtime **Hockey Night in Canada** personality **Don Cherry** said in his video, *Rock 'Em Sock 'Em Hockey: Volume 2*, "You know, if [Flames goalie Mike] Vernon had the arms of a gorilla, Terry [Crisp] would still be coaching. I think."

Mike Krushelnyski Goal in 2OT- Kings vs Flames (4/14/...



Terry Crisp was the Flames head coach during this series and, despite guiding the club to the Stanley Cup the previous spring, was fired following their loss to the Kings. The Flames would not win another playoff round for 14 years. In 2004, then-Flames head coach **Darryl Sutter** would help snap said skid as he guided the team to within one game of winning the Stanley Cup.

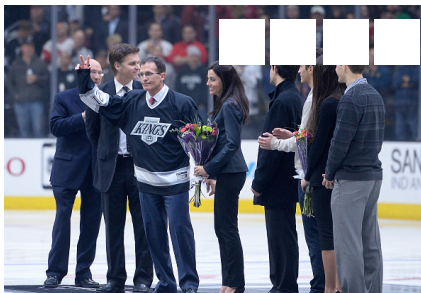
“There is nothing better than playoff hockey,” Granato exclaimed. “The old division matchups were intense. We had some spectacular games in that series and it was topped off with Mike Krushelnyski’s goal from his back in Game 6.”

If Tony Granato had felt any pressure to meet the expectations put upon him when he joined the Kings, he hid those feelings very well. Not only was Granato a part of his new team’s upset of the Flames but he was instrumental in said win, scoring five goals and adding three assists in the series.

I asked Granato what he felt was the biggest factor towards his offensive success against Calgary that spring.

“I was lucky to have played with Wayne [Gretzky] most of that series and he led the way offensively as he always did,” he said. “It was one of the most memorable playoff series that I had the thrill of being a part of.”

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Unfortunately, while the Kings were able to knock off the defending champs for a second-straight year, they got swept in the second round for the second-straight year. The Edmonton Oilers, who had been eliminated by the silver-and-black in 1989, would make short work of the Kings in 1990 — backed by current Kings goaltending coach **Bill Ranford** — en route to their fifth Stanley Cup crown in seven years. Still, the Kings opening-round upset of the Flames was no less significant for the team or for Granato personally.

Following the 1990 playoffs, Granato **would go on** to spend six more seasons with the Kings where, in 380 games, he would score 148 goals and 305 points.

In addition to his contributions in the 1990 playoffs, Tony Granato would help the Kings clinch their first — and only — division title the following season before contributing to their first Stanley Cup Final trip in 1993.



Now the head men's hockey coach of his alma mater, the University of Wisconsin, Granato looks back on his career with the Kings with great pride. To this day, he remains one of the biggest fan favourites in the City of Angels and deservedly so as Tony Granato's career with the Los Angeles Kings has, and always will be, something worth celebrating.

