

# ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS LEGEND MIKE MURPHY

👤 Ryan Cowley 🕒 December 14, 2016



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From **Taylor** and **Norstrom**, to **Blake** and **Brown**, to **Gretzky** and, for a brief period, **Robitaille**, being captain of the **Los Angeles Kings** has come with a great sense of honour and responsibility. One captain, in particular, was given said role at a very crucial time in the franchise's still-young history.

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Entering just their ninth year of existence and coming off a franchise-record 105-point season, the Los Angeles Kings, fresh off trading captain **Terry Harper** — for, along with **Bart Crashley**, a pretty good player named **Marcel Dionne** — awarded the 'C' to 25-year-old **Mike Murphy**, who had just come off his first full season with the team.

Known as more of a grinder than a goal-scorer, Murphy, a native of Toronto, had arrived to Los Angeles during the 1973-74 season when he was acquired from the **New York Rangers**.



To go from a team laden with future **Hall-of-Famers** such as **Rod Gilbert**, **Brad Park** and **Eddie Giacomin** to a team that had missed the playoffs in each of the previous four seasons would have been a letdown to most. Mike Murphy, however, jumped at the opportunity to help turn his new club, so to speak, from pretenders into contenders.

Notching just 11 points in 31 total games with the Rangers, Murphy **would notch** 29 more in 53 games upon his arrival to the Kings. He would then follow that up with 68 points [30 goals, 38 assists] the next year and another 68 points [26G, 42A] in 1975-76 — his first season as captain.

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Beyond his offensive numbers, though, Mike Murphy, in short time, would prove to be an outstanding captain the Kings for six seasons — the longest tenure until Wayne Gretzky surpassed it in the 90's — before ultimately moving behind the team's bench where he harnessed his leadership skills in a different capacity.

In this week's edition of **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'** series, we speak with Kings legend Mike Murphy who discusses joining the Kings, his years as a captain, relinquishing said captaincy and learning the coaching ropes, if you will, from, rest their souls, **Roger Nielson** and **Pat Quinn**. Murphy even elaborates on the latter and how the 2016 Hall-of-Fame inductee impacted his coaching career in addition to playing with the late, great **Gordie Howe** in 1980 in what was Mr. Hockey's final All-Star Game.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is Mike Murphy.

**Make Way for the Kings: Your Kings career began on November 30, 1973 when the club acquired you from the New York Rangers. Despite playing just 31 games for them, how did you feel leaving the Rangers knowing how successful they were during that time? Conversely, how did you feel about joining a Kings team who had missed the playoffs the previous four years?**

**Mike Murphy:** Well, good question, Ryan. Back then, I was a very young player. I was just out of junior — I played a couple of years with the **St. Louis Blues**, the New York Rangers – and I was really a fourth-line player; I wasn't getting a lot of ice time. I was on a real good team and they were one of the best teams in the league

at that time — the Rangers — but young players are often given an opportunity through a trade, and usually you're traded for because the veteran team wants to reinforce their lineup with experience and the team that's acquiring you is trying to build. That was the case with the Kings. The Kings were making a lot of moves, they were acquiring young players – **Dan Maloney, Bob Murdoch, Tom Williams, Sheldon Kannegiesser** [the latter two acquired with Murphy from New York] – all young players that were added to the Kings because they were playing third- and fourth-line roles on older teams.

So, it was a great opportunity for me. It was a great horizon, a new and exciting start. You could wipe the slate clean. When I went out [to Los Angeles], I knew **Bob Pulford**, he was the coach, I had played for [then-Kings GM] **Jake Milford** in past years, so I was really excited to be going to a team where the management knew who I was. They knew how I played, they knew what to expect and they were going to give me some time and some ice time. They were going to be patient and let me play. They were going to give me a good opportunity to play with top players and I was lucky because when I went to the Kings, I ended up playing with **[Butch] Goring** and [Tom] Williams, I played with **Frank St. Marseille**. We had a good balance of players out there and it was— as I said, I became a second- and first-line player with the Kings as I was a third- and fourth-line player with the Rangers and it opened the door for my career. It jump-started me, so I was on my way to having a successful **NHL** career.

**MW: While they weren't established when you arrived there, the Los Angeles Kings were beginning to turn their luck around by the time you had joined the team. Not only did the Kings return to the playoffs in 1974 but they went on to have a 105-point season the following season, which remains a franchise record. From head coach Bob Pulford to first-year captain Terry Harper, there were plenty of reasons for the Kings' vast success that season. What can you attribute most to the Kings' success that season?**

**MM:** Another good question. We were a young group of players that were thrown together. We had an excellent coach in **Bob Pulford** and there was lots of enthusiasm, there was lots of energy on our team. The parts all fit together and suddenly this group of nomad players, this group of retreads from other teams, they all found their own place with the Kings; they fit in. Bob Pulford designed a system, played a system to what the **Toronto Maple Leafs** played in the 60's. [The Leafs], as you probably recall, won four Stanley Cups in 60's. We played a very strong, defensive game, we protected our goalie. Probably the one star we had on our team was **Rogie Vachon** and we were able to play a defensive system that gave Rogie the best angles on pucks and we were able to clear the rebounds. But again, we were a young team, we were enthusiastic, winning was contagious – we started to win about halfway through the year. I got [to Los Angeles] in December and come about late-February, early-March, we really started to play well. We became one of the better teams in the NHL at that time. I know we carried that over to the next year and had a great season but we were very good at the

end of that season where I think we won nine or 10-straight home games in March, and it was attributed to the style of play we were all committed to playing; it was good coaching and managing by Pulford and Milford and it was great goaltending by Vachon. That's why we were successful.

**MW: Speaking of Terry Harper, the Kings traded him to Detroit for Marcel Dionne immediately following the 1974-75 season. Following his departure, the Kings named you their new captain. Where were you when he heard the news that you were to be named the new captain and how did it feel to be chosen to wear the 'C'?**

MM: Well, first of all, Terry Harper was an excellent captain and was an excellent teammate. I don't know if there was ever a player who played 100 per cent like he did every night, every situation, and he was an aggravating player to play against. He made life tough for the other team.

Marcel Dionne was one of the greatest players of our era. He was a true superstar and the people of L.A. related to star power. Marcel brought star power. He was exciting to watch, he was a dynamic personality, he was a great skater and a great shooter. So, he really put the Kings on the map.

As a captain, I was informed at training camp by Bob Pulford on the ice. He skated up to me and said, "I'm going to announce you as the captain of the team today," and it was a great honour. I was humbled by it. I think captains are people who play and practice hard and who say and do the right things, and that's not always easy in the life of a sports celebrity or a sports personality. You get to say whatever you want but it's important for captains to say and do the right things, to lead by example, to do your best. You're not always the best player but you do have the best intentions for your team, and that's the way we try to approach it as a captain. I try to play my game, be myself and set a good example for other players.

**MW: In said trade, the Kings acquired the aforementioned Dionne who was coming off career-highs with 47 goals and 121 points. How did you feel personally about Dionne's acquisition?**

MM: When you acquire a player of Marcel's ability, of his star power as I mentioned earlier— he was a team player, he was a character person and it gave us a great opportunity to win. We had lacked goal-scoring on the Kings the year before. We weren't able to score and we were eliminated in the first round of the playoffs by the Maple Leafs — all very low-scoring games. We didn't have much punch in our lineup, we didn't have much firepower. Marcel brought firepower. He was a dynamic player, a great scorer and the Kings needed that. It was a difficult trade because we had a lot of success the year before but I'm not sure we could have duplicated that success again. Everybody played their best [in 1974-75], everything worked our way and that's very hard to duplicate, and changes needed to be made for the Kings to grow and to become a better team and a better

organization, and Marcel was the foundation for that. As I said, he put the Kings on the map in the mid-70's when he arrived.

**MM: You would register 56 points in 1977-78 and 27 goals in 1979-80 – the latter of which earned you a spot at the All-Star Game. Describe the emotions involved in not only being selected as an all-star but playing in the game. Was there any extra significance knowing that it was Gordie Howe's return to Detroit or were you simply just thrilled to be a part of the festivities?**

MM: Being with Gordie Howe in the All-Star Game in 1980, as I look back now, I wished I stopped and smelled the roses more because I was so enamoured and so excited about being in the All-Star Game. I really didn't appreciate the fact that I was playing with Gordie Howe, Mr. Hockey, arguably the greatest player of all-time, and that bothers me a little bit. I actually sat beside Gordie in the dressing room in that particular game, and Gordie was a remarkable gentleman to me, treated me like I was the star and I'll never forget that. But, I can tell you this: It was a huge thrill as I look back now. I wish I had stopped and smelled the roses, as I said earlier, because it was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. I was not an all-star-type player; I was more of a grinder, I was more of an average player, so just to get the opportunity to go to an all-star game just once was really thrilling and humbling for me and with Gordie Howe, it made it even better. So, it was one of the high points in my career.

**MM: Following the 1980-81 season, Dave Lewis took over as the Kings captain while you remained with the club for another two seasons. Could you describe the situation that led to Lewis wearing the 'C'? When I spoke to Dave Lewis earlier this season, he had told me that you were nothing short of the consummate professional and that both of you got along very well. How did you find the situation to be?**

MM: I had been injured in training camp [in 1981]. There was a change in coach, there was a change in general manager and I had been injured that year in training camp, and the year before, I had to play a great deal at the end of the season. So, I had a sense that something might be happening. You want your captain on the ice, you want your captain playing, your captain can't be someone sitting in the stands, not dressing or sitting on the bench. Your captain has to be one of your everyday players and, at that point in my career, I was not playing as much as I did when I was a younger player. I was getting to be older and I was going to be out for four or five months at the start of the season because I had a fairly-severe knee injury and when I had the knee injury, it was going to take me out of the lineup. So, [the Kings' coaching staff] made **Dave Lewis** the captain and I accepted it graciously. It was the right thing for the team at that time. I was honoured to be the captain of the Kings when I was the captain, but time moves on, you have to accept those things in sports and Dave Lewis was an outstanding player and an outstanding captain. He did a great job.

I can only say superlatives about how [the captaincy change] was handled, how Dave assumed the role and I still felt like a big part of the team even though I wasn't the captain. I was on the team, I still played, contributed and we had a great year [in 1981-82] and eliminated the **[Edmonton] Oilers** in that playoff series [which included the famous '**Miracle on Manchester**' game].

So, all in all, that's sports, that's life. You deal with it when it happens and I was, as I said, blessed to be the captain and I was honoured, and when Dave became the captain, I was more than willing to accept that.

**MW: Following your playing career, you joined the Kings coaching staff from 1984 to 1988 with the latter two seasons as the head coach. Who influenced you most during your time behind the Kings bench?**

**MM:** Well, I think the most important thing is when you stop playing and you start coaching is that you bring an outstanding knowledge of players on your team, but also an outstanding knowledge of players on the ice for opponents. So, you can attribute to helping set up game plans to set up line matches and defensive pairings that will play against the best players on the other team, and I think you can bring enthusiasm, excitement and a work ethic that can spread down to the players.

That's what we try to do and I was really fortunate to work with Roger Nielson and Pat Quinn, two of my most favourite people, especially in the world of hockey. We lost both of them but I was honoured to spend time on the bench and in practice and be part of their staffs when I was a very young coach and learning how to coach. So, I do not have enough superlatives to say about those two gentlemen. They were the best and working under them was incredible.

**MW: As an assistant, you were working with then-head coach, the late Pat Quinn. How do you feel he fared as the Kings' head coach and how did you two get along?**

**MM:** Pat Quinn was a great hockey person and he had a great knowledge for the game. He was a great communicator, he was a great educator and he was a professional in all areas. He treated people with respect. Everywhere he went, he had time for people. Whether it was the usher who saw you into the game or the parking attendant or whether it was the president or owner of the team, he treated all people with great respect and I was hired for that and I like to think that I learned from that. It was as much about his ability to treat people fairly, kindly and in a very Christian manner and again, his hockey knowledge and what he's accomplished speaks for itself, but what people don't realize is what a good human being he was and what a kind person he was.



Mike Murphy would go on to play 12 seasons in the NHL with nine-and-a-half of those coming in a Kings uniform. In **his 673 games** with the Kings, Murphy would notch 194 goals and 263 points for 457 points while amassing a grand total of 442 penalty minutes, as he was an outstanding leader but a revered fan favourite, as well.

These days, though, the 66-year-old former captain isn't always so popular in Los Angeles.

Being the Senior Vice-President of Hockey Operations for the **National Hockey League**, it is up to Murphy and his staff to make the final decision in determining whether a reviewable goal stands or is disallowed. Due to his position, Murphy has peeved a few Kings fans when goals go against their team but, conversely, receives plenty of praise from said fans when decisions are made in the Kings' favour. Case in point: the video posted above.

Nevertheless, Mike Murphy's career in Los Angeles will not be overshadowed for letting a controversial goal here and there stand years later. Instead, Murphy's career in Los Angeles will be defined by not only being one of the Kings' most successful captains but helping to transform them from, to use the aforementioned term, pretenders-into-contenders. Yet, while the aforementioned Terry Harper played an integral role in his successor's leadership role, Mike Murphy was also fortunate enough to play for and learn from three future-Hall-of-Fame coaches: **Al Arbour** in St. Louis, **Emile Francis** in New York and, of course, Bob Pulford in Los Angeles.

With the tremendous goaltending prowess of Rogie Vachon to the goal-scoring touch of Marcel Dionne to the playmaking aptitude of Dave Taylor, the success of the Los Angeles Kings in the mid- to late-70's would not have been possible without the leadership of Mike Murphy. Both as a player and as a coach, Murphy has left a

lasting impression on the Los Angeles Kings and its generations of fans. In fact, just this past Saturday, the team honoured their former captain in a special pre-game ceremony. Murphy evidently brought the Kings luck as they scored a 4-1 victory over the **Ottawa Senators**, the team Murphy most recently served as a coach for.

Looking back on a half-century of Kings hockey, we salute and we celebrate the legacy of Mike Murphy.