

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS LEGEND BERNIE NICHOLLS

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 July 29, 2016



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With the start of the 1988-89 season came an exciting new chapter for the **Los Angeles Kings**.

Suddenly, the team known for donning forum-blue-and-gold took a page out of the **NFL's Raiders'** book by switching to silver-and-black. But it wasn't just the appearance that made the Kings different. They had also acquired the game's greatest player in **Wayne Gretzky** in what is still considered the biggest trade in sports — let alone hockey — history. Yet, while the new-look Kings may have had their hopes pinned on their newest acquisition, it was those who had already established themselves in Los Angeles who were determined to make their mark on the coming season. For one player in particular, though, the 1988-89 campaign would see him exceed his already-impressive totals.

Entering the 1988-89 campaign, **Bernie Nicholls** was one of the elder statesman of a young Kings club having already played seven seasons with the team. At 27, Nicholls was just entering the prime of his career despite hitting the 100-point plateau once, the 95-point plateau three times and scoring 40-plus goals twice. So, while the addition of Gretzky immediately helped the Kings become the hottest ticket in each of the 21 NHL arenas, it was Nicholls who gave the fans their money's worth as he would go on to score an unbelievable 70 goals and 150 points that season.

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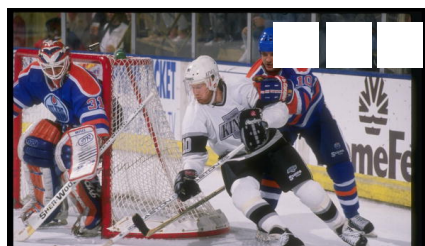
Recently, **Make Way for the Kings** correspondent **Christina Miller** caught up with Mr. Nicholls about the 1988-89 season, first asking what contributed most to his offensive surge.



"Obviously Wayne [Gretzky]," Nicholls said matter-of-factly. "I was fortunate enough to play with the best of everyone at that time, but Wayne brought out the best in me, in all of us. My stats got better every year, I wanted to improve every year of course, but i didn't expect to jump to 70. Playing with Wayne and that team brought out the best in me."

Thanks to Nicholls' contributions, the Kings went from finishing 14th-overall (or seventh-worst) in 1987-88 to fourth-overall in 1988-89 where they were awarded home-ice advantage in their opening-round playoff series against the **Edmonton Oilers**. Despite being without Gretzky, though, the Oilers were still a force to be reckoned with.

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While their ho-hum 38-34-8 finish to the regular season may not have looked great on paper, the Oilers had entered the 1989 playoffs having won four of the previous five Stanley Cups and were led in points by **Jari Kurri** with 102 while the big name who went to Edmonton in the Gretzky trade, **Jimmy Carson**, led the club with 49 goals. In addition, the Oilers had many of the championship pieces still intact including Hall-of-Famers **Mark Messier**, **Glenn Anderson** and **Grant Fuhr**. As for the Kings, despite finishing seven points ahead of Edmonton, were not as proven in the postseason having not won a series since 1982. Yet, while the Kings now had an established playoff performer in Gretzky, they had already had one in Nicholls as well who, in his previous two postseasons, notched 15 points in 10 total games. But 1989 would see more playoff magic from Mr. Nicholls.

Unfortunately for the Kings, the skeptics who didn't give them a fighting chance were proven right through the first four games. The Oilers built a 3-1 series against the Kings, pushing Gretzky's new team to the brink. However, the silver-and-black fought back thanks largely to Nicholls who would score four goals — including the series winner — and seven assists in the seven-game series en route to eliminating the defending **Stanley Cup** champions.

"That is one of the greatest series I ever got to play," an emphatic Nicholls told us. "We had won Game 5. I believe we were down two or three points in Game 6 and battled back hard. Everyone dreams of playing in Game 7 and this was a dream come true, but to score the winning goal clearly made it the best game ever."

As for his series winner, Nicholls took a pass from Gretzky in front before wrapping around the aforementioned Grant Fuhr to score as he fell to the ice. Being one of those goals that looked beautiful both in regular speed and in slow motion, it was a play which will always be remembered not only by Kings fans but by Mr. Nicholls himself.

Bernie Nicholls great falling down goal - Kings vs Oilers - 4/15/89 (Game 7)



"I still remember that," Nicholls recalled, laughing. "I mean [there are] a lot of goals but some you just really remember, like this one. I came in from the right and was already falling as I reached down to wrap around [Fuhr] to score. Not every goal is pretty [but] I was just trying to get [the puck in the net] any way I could."

With the career season he had, it only seems prophetic that a goal that beautiful would stand as the series winner, especially against a team as daunting as the Edmonton Oilers were. To make the upset even more memorable for the Kings, Wayne Gretzky would cap it off by scoring what yours truly has always described as the most exhilarating empty-net goal ever scored, vigorously fighting off former linemate, the aforementioned Jari Kurri, to seal the win.

Wayne Gretzky Empty Net Goal vs Oilers - 1989 Playoffs



While the Kings did trade him the following season, Bernie Nicholls **remains one of the most** productive — and most popular — Kings of all-time. His 327 goals ranks him fourth on the club's all-time list while his 758 points ranks him fifth. Nicholls even still holds a couple of team records, which were both set in 1988-89: most goals in a season with 70 and most points in a game with eight. Yet, while some could assume that he was born to be a King, Bernie Nicholls admitted that he wasn't even familiar with the Kings franchise upon being drafted by them in 1980. That, however, changed quickly.

"I was a kid from a small town (Haliburton, Ontario) and didn't know who the Kings were," Nicholls said. "I thought, 'Los Angeles Kings? Wow!' After playing there I realized it was the best place to be."

While he made a few stops after Los Angeles, Bernie Nicholls has never forgotten the impact the Kings franchise had on him. Nicholls even returned to the Kings in 2011-12 where **he helped win the team** that drafted him their first Stanley Cup.

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"I played for six different teams but the Los Angeles Kings will always be my favorite," he stated. "There's something special about it. [The fans] always treated me well and they treat me special whenever I'm there and I always love coming back. The Kings will always be my favorite."

When fans look back on a half-century of memories for the Los Angeles Kings, the 1988-89 season will be always be near the top. Wayne Gretzky may have brought more fans to the games but it was Bernie Nicholls who convinced those fans to keep coming back as he helped contribute to one of the greatest campaigns in club

history. It is no coincidence that 26 years later after being traded, Bernie Nicholls still remains a fan favourite in Los Angeles.



While he may not have scored 70 goals or 150 points again, Nicholls would nevertheless go on to have an illustrious 18-year career that saw him notch 1209 points — numbers worthy of, in this writer's opinion, induction into the **Hockey Hall of Fame**. Until then, though, let us celebrate the Kings' 50th anniversary by raising a glass to Mr. Nicholls, thanking him for everything he has done for this proud franchise.

**Special thanks to Christina Miller for helping me with this interview.*