

# ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS LEGEND LUC ROBITAILLE

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 October 18, 2016



*Image credit: Chris Thomas*

Looking back on how it all started, it is almost incomprehensible to fathom that he was drafted in the ninth round. Yet, despite his nickname “Lucky”, **Luc Robitaille** had proven that he was anything but.

A native of Montreal, Quebec, Luc Robitaille **was drafted** by the **Los Angeles Kings**

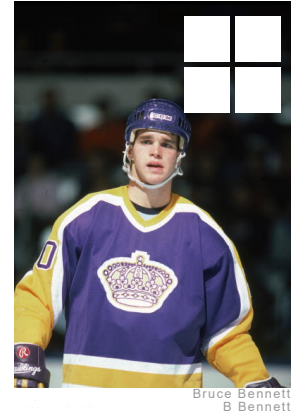
171<sup>st</sup> overall in 1984 and while, at that juncture, he only had one season on junior under his belt – albeit a very successful one – no one could have predicted the legacy Robitaille would leave not only on the Los Angeles Kings but on the game of hockey overall.

Scoring 45 goals and 84 points, Robitaille took home the **Calder Trophy** as the **NHL’s** top rookie in 1986-87. But that was only a warm-up act to what would be an illustrious Hall-of-Fame career. But after a decorated playing career, Robitaille would prove to be just as successful in the front office where, as the Kings President of Business

Operations & Alternate Governor, he would help lead the team who drafted him to their first two **Stanley Cup** crowns.

In this week’s edition of **Make Way for the Kings’ ‘Royal Reflections’** series, we speak with Mr. Robitaille about his career with the Kings. From his rookie season to achieving career-highs — 62 goals and 125 points — in the wake of an injured **Wayne Gretzky** in 1992-93 to **his enshrinement** into the **Hockey Hall of Fame**, this is Luc Robitaille’s story.

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LA Kings Luc Robitaille's Last Home Game

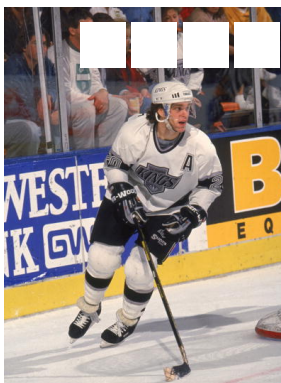




**Make Way for the Kings:** You were drafted in the 9th round of the 1984 Draft. For some players, being selected so late would deter them. Instead, you went from 85 points with the QMJHL's Hull Olympiques in 1983-84 to 148 the next season to 191 (68 goals) in your final year of junior. Did you use your late draft status as a motivational tool to get better or were there other factors at play?

**Luc Robitaille:** For me, it was always because I was a hard worker and I wanted to learn to be the best player I could be. So, my first year of junior, I got to learn a lot. We didn't have a great team and the second year, I became more— right away, I became a veteran and I knew I wanted to make a difference, be a difference-maker and [the Hull Olympiques] gave me that opportunity. So, coming back for the third season, I just knew I wanted to improve. I needed to improve if I wanted to have a shot at playing in the NHL.

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Bruce Bennett

**MW:** Describe your rookie season with the Kings of 1986-87. You were joining a team who had missed the playoffs in three of the previous four seasons but you were also joining a promising young team with Bernie Nicholls, Steve Duchesne and that year's 2nd-overall pick, Jimmy Carson. Did you fit in right away or did it take some time to get adjusted? I can imagine that scoring 45 goals and 84 points that season made you very popular in the locker room.

S Reyes

**LR:** Coming into my rookie season, I was just excited. I wanted to play in the NHL. I never took it for granted that I was there and I was very excited about playing. It just seemed that things went pretty well but as a player, you always believe you could do even better. So, I kept pushing to get better and at the end of the year, I was like, "Whoa!" You realize that you had a pretty good year and we had a good, young team — you were right. So, Bernie Nicholls, he was a young center, Jimmy Carson was 18, we had Steve Duchesne on D. We were building something pretty special and obviously two years later, getting Wayne Gretzky changed everything but at that time, [then-Kings GM] Rogie Vachon was doing a good job of building the team.

**MW:** In the summer of 1988, the Kings made arguably the biggest trade in sports history with the acquisition of Wayne Gretzky. Where were you when you heard the news? How did you feel about acquiring Gretzky and how did you feel about the potential impact he would have not only in Los Angeles but in the state of California?

**LR:** Wayne Gretzky came into L.A. and changed the game. You look at today, we have a team in Anaheim, a team in San Jose, Phoenix, Dallas, Tampa Bay, Miami, Nashville — all of these teams came after Wayne Gretzky came to L.A. because it showed that you could really have success in the southern states, the southern cities and I think people became believers in the game of hockey. I believe the biggest moment to ever happen to hockey was when Wayne Gretzky came to L.A.

**MW:** Speaking of Gretzky, he missed a significant part of the 1992-93 season due to injury. This prompted some to dismiss the Kings right off the bat. However, in Gretzky's absence, you led the Kings by achieving career-highs with 63 goals and 125 points — impressive considering you had already averaged 47 goals and 98 points prior to that season. While Gretzky did eventually return and help in the Kings' run to the Finals, what do you feel you did to step up and become a leader?

**LR:** Well, that year, it was kind of funny because to have a good team, you have to have a couple of scoring lines. So, for the first few years of my career, I was always on the second line to kind of increase the scoring of our organization. That year, with Wayne being injured and when our coach [Barry Melrose] was hired, I was specifically asked to be on the first line as a first-line center. So, what it does usually, it changes your minutes you play a little bit, it changes your responsibility and I enjoyed it, I thrived on it. It gave me more opportunity to show what I can do and I think that's one of the reasons I had such a good year statistically.

**MW:** After a couple of stints with the Kings, you went to Detroit in 2001 where you won your first Stanley Cup the following spring. At last year's Hall of Fame induction the legendary Scotty Bowman had emphasized how integral your contributions were to that Cup win. While the feeling of winning your first Cup had to have been exhilarating, how was that season for you overall? While you weren't

**with the Kings, you did achieve the highest success with Hall-of-Famers like Steve Yzerman, Nicklas Lidstrom and Dominik Hasek, playing under the greatest coach of all-time in the aforementioned Bowman and even being reunited with former Kings teammate, the aforementioned Steve Duchesne. Describe the overall feeling of that whole season.**

LR: Well, it was a pretty special season. Winning a Cup is the greatest thing and I believe as a player, you never really know what it takes to win the Cup until you win the Stanley Cup. Obviously being in Detroit that year and playing with all those great players, I got to learn a lot about what it takes and what a culture is, what the right things are to make the organization the best it could be and it was really a life-changing moment for me just to know more about it and to learn more about what it takes to be successful, and I can tell you today that I brought that to the L.A. Kings organization — the philosophy anyway.

**MW: When you returned to Los Angeles, you not only became the greatest scorer in Kings history but you also became the highest-scoring left-winger of all-time with 668 goals. Being drafted in the ninth round, did you ever imagine that when you retired, you would be able to look back on a career so illustrious?**

LR: No, never. I just wanted to play in the NHL. I feel I was lucky enough to have a chance and personally, I just wanted to stay in the NHL and play in the NHL and I can't believe I got as far as I've been. It's been an amazing run.

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**MW: Last summer, Nick Nickson had told me that induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame is not something most strive for, or even think about. Was that the case for you? Even in the latter part of your career, did you ever flirt with the idea that you could be a Hall-of-Famer? Describe how it felt when you were chosen in 2009 and being inducted that November.**

LR: I think getting into the Hall, getting into the sport, you never really think about it. You go there and you— you just go there and play the game every day, you play the best you can and then you retire. I would say the day you get the call that you got into the Hall of Fame, you're like, "What?! Really?!" You know, it's an overwhelming feeling because it's not something you ever— I don't think anybody gets into playing professional sports thinking they're going for the Hall of Fame but when you get there, it is the ultimate reward because we all know the sacrifice we've had to do and I think that it's something that's hard to describe. But it's not really something you play for. It's above anything that you do while you play because it's the Hall of Fame. It's a cherished club.

**MW: If you ask most fans, no name is more synonymous with the Los Angeles Kings than Luc Robitaille. You were not only successful as a player but successful as an executive as well, helping the Kings win**

**two Stanley Cups in three years. How did it feel to bring a Cup to Los Angeles after so many years? Speaking personally, I fell to my knees and cried as I had supported the Kings through many frustrating years and patient rebuilding phases. Describe how you felt when the Kings won it all in 2012 and even again in 2014.**

LR: It was the greatest feeling ever because one thing with working for the organization for me was I feel like I was part of what we built and I just thought that being part of a special group, what we set out to do as an organization, that getting to the end where you win a Cup was absolutely incredible.

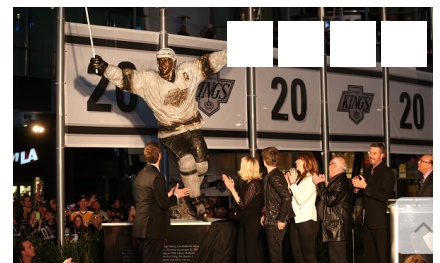
One-on-one with Luc Robitaille



When he left for **Pittsburgh** in 1994, fans missed him. When he left for **Detroit** in 2001, fans missed him even more. In some cases when players leave to sign elsewhere, there are some hard feelings involved. That was never the case for Luc Robitaille who was adored by the Los Angeles Kings' ever-loyal fanbase from day one. In fact, Robitaille means so much to the Kings franchise that **he was even given** his own statue which resides in front of his team's home, the **STAPLES Center** – an honour received only by a very select few. In addition, he was **even voted** by **Sports Illustrated** the greatest NHLer to ever wear No. 20.

Of all the players that have donned the uniform of the Los Angeles Kings over the years and of all the lineage that came with each representative, no one has had quite the impact on this proud franchise than Robitaille has.

Of his 1431 career games, 1077 **were spent** with the Kings where Robitaille scored a **franchise-leading** 557 goals to go along with 597 assists and 1154



points. Overall, Robitaille finished his career with 668 goals — which, as previously mentioned, leads all left-wingers — and 1394 points, which **places him** 21st on the NHL's all-time list.

Both as a player and as an executive, Luc Robitaille has celebrated a career that not even the greatest scriptwriters in Hollywood can put together any better, and one that Kings fans are and will continue to be forever grateful for.

Mr. Robitaille, for the past, for the present and for the future, we thank you.

*\*Special thanks to Luc Robitaille, Kehly Sloane, Jeff Duarte and MakeWay artist Chris Thomas for their contributions to this article.*