

ROYAL REFLECTIONS: SPEAKING WITH LA KINGS ALUM ALEXEI ZHITNIK

👤 Ryan Cowley 📅 March 10, 2017



Image credit: Ryan Cowley Original photo credit: Harry Scull Jr.

As the **Los Angeles Kings** entered the 1990's, there was a palpable feeling that the club was about to turn a crucial corner in their history.

Led by **Wayne Gretzky**, the Kings had a good balance of veteran leadership with **Dave Taylor** and **Larry Robinson** to offensive firepower from **Luc Robitaille** to the freshly-acquired pair of **Tomas Sandstrom** and **Tony Granato**. But, as the old sport adage goes, 'Defense wins championships' and the silver-and-black knew that if they wanted to make the next step forward, they would need to solidify their blueline.

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Having drafted **Rob Blake** in 1988, the Kings then selected **Darryl Sydor** in 1990 before taking a promising defensive stalwart from **Sokol Kiev** in 1991: **Alexei Zhitnik**.

Born on October 10, 1972 in Kiev, Ukraine, Alexei Zhitnik was drafted 81st overall by the Kings in 1991 and after a season with **CKSA Moscow**, was expected to be a cog on the Los Angeles blueline. Yet, while his defensive game was noteworthy, Zhitnik was also known to chip in on the offensive side of things. In his first

season with the Kings, 1992-93, Zhitnik would score 12 goals and add 36 assists in 78 games. He even added three goals and nine assists in 24 playoff games as he helped the Kings reach their first **Stanley Cup Final** in franchise history. ^

Despite being one of the team's most promising defenseman, though, Zhitnik's time in Los Angeles lasted just over two seasons as early in the lockout-shortened 1995 campaign, he was traded to the **Buffalo Sabres** in a six-player deal.

In this week's edition of **MakeWay's 'Royal Reflections'**, we speak with former Kings defenseman Alexei Zhitnik about his playing career in Los Angeles, including how he enjoyed playing under then-head coach **Barry Melrose**, and how he felt about being traded to the Sabres in 1995.

This is Alexei Zhitnik.

Alexei Zhitnik splits Jets defense and assists to Sands...



Make Way for the Kings: In your rookie season of 1992-93, you would appear in 78 games, scoring 12 goals and adding 36 assists. Which of your fellow defensemen did you learn most from that season and which players did you have good on-ice chemistry with?

Alexei Zhitnik: I can't tell you just one player. It was a great group of guys. I was paired with Rob Blake, who is now the [assistant GM] of the L.A. Kings; Darryl Sydor, he played in the **NHL** a long time, and **Jari Kurri**, Tony Granato. We had a really good group of guys and [head coach Barry Melrose] was great to me. I got to play a lot — on the power play, penalty kill — it was great. That was Barry Melrose. So, it was a great time for me.

MW: Your coach in Los Angeles was the aforementioned Barry Melrose. How did his coaching style affect your game?

AZ: For me, it was my first year in the NHL. I guess for [Barry], it was his first year [coaching] in the NHL. He had coached in the **IHL** before. But, he was a strict coach. He was doing a great job, I think, for the team. If he's right, he's going to tell you or if he's unhappy with the way you played, he's going to let you know. I think [1992-93] was a great, great year for the organization overall and he was great in taking the Kings to the [Stanley Cup] Final. During the season, he didn't have much of a problem. It was just us playing hockey. Barry was a big part of us winning that season, and I know he's doing a great job now [with ESPN].

MW: Before coming to Los Angeles, you had played three seasons in Russia for CSKA Moscow. From hockey popularity to lifestyle to overall atmosphere, could you describe the similarities and differences between playing in Russia and Los Angeles, or North America in general?

AZ: Well, it was total different hockey, total different atmosphere. We were among the first group of players that moved from Europe to the NHL. I mean a lot of guys probably, maybe 30 to 40 players, started playing in the NHL at 19. So, it was total different for me and I was in the same dressing room as Wayne Gretzky and Jari Kurri: top players in the world.

MW: As part of the Kings' rebuilding plan, you were involved in a blockbuster trade that sent you to the Buffalo Sabres in February 1995. Being just 22 at the time and it being the first time you had been traded, describe what was going through your mind not only when you heard the news but entering your new team's locker room.

AZ: Well, it was my first trade and it was a shock for me. First of all, I wasn't expecting to be traded. We played only— it was a short lockout season, so I believe we played only 10 or 12 games and I think I was doing all right. When you get traded, you're always unhappy but it's good because somebody wants you, somebody invites you to play and I wound up playing a great 10 years for the Buffalo Sabres organization, so I can't complain. I mean, that first year, there was the trade and the short season, I had a couple of injuries right away, so it wasn't my best season. But, [the Sabres] had a great team and they had a lot of all-star players like **Dominik Hasek** and we played very special hockey. We played in the Stanley Cup Final [in 1999], we played in the Conference Final [in '98 and '99]. We had very good teams during those times. There was no basketball,

football in the summer and hockey in the winter. So, it was a great time for me and [Buffalo] was a great fit for me and my family.



Alexei Zhitnik power shot and goal against Panthers (1...



In 170 games with the Kings, Alexei Zhitnik would score 26 goals with 18 of them coming on the power play. Overall, Zhitnik registered 107 points in a Kings uniform — his **best points-per-game** mark of any of the five NHL teams he suited up for at 0.63.

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Following his career with the Kings, Zhitnik would produce less points per season. However, he became more of a leader since leaving southern California, anchoring a Sabres blueline that earned them a Stanley Cup Final appearance in 1999 — the team's first in 24 years. Zhitnik's leadership and defensive prowess helped boast one of the best defensive units in hockey, which included veteran **James Patrick**, defensive specialist **Richard Smehlik** and unsung talent such as **Jay McKee** and **Mike Wilson**.

In addition to the Kings and Sabres, Zhitnik would also play for the **Islanders**, **Flyers** and the since-relocated **Atlanta Thrashers** before returning to Russia where he retired in 2010 after two seasons with **Moscow Dynamo**.

In the early 1990's, the Los Angeles Kings were blessed to have had a plethora of deep-rooted talent to guide them to the next level. While they may not have won the Stanley Cup, the Kings did turn a lot of heads in the spring of 1993 as unsung heroes like Zhitnik helped the club reach the Stanley Cup Final in an unexpected, albeit impressive, playoff run.

When he was traded away in 1995, many Kings fans were left wondering what if their team had kept Zhitnik. No one knows obviously but it nonetheless makes for some interesting debates, especially considering how much the Kings declined in the few years since dealing Zhitnik. With that said, though, it was a case of quality over quantity with Mr. Zhitnik who left a positive mark on the Los Angeles Kings in the early 1990's and, for that, we tip our caps to the former blueliner.

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