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The tale of a 19-year-old beer and an organization that finally got it right

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The Canadian Press

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LOS ANGELES, Calif. - The bottle of unopened Budweiser was delivered to the [Los Angeles Kings](#) dressing room the night they lost the 1993 Stanley Cup at the old Montreal Forum.

It then travelled back to an office in the Great Western Forum, made the move to Staples Center along with the Kings in 1999 and eventually found a resting place on top of a tool box in Pete Demers' garage. And after 19 years, the former Kings head athletic trainer finally found a reason to drink it.

Out of the Stanley Cup, no less.

"The players poured it down the hatch and on my suit while they chanted 'Pete! Pete! Pete!'" Demers said Tuesday, a day after the Kings captured their first Stanley Cup in franchise history. "How about that? And that old rotten beer tasted great."

A rotten beer? In the Stanley Cup? Only someone tied to an organization as colourful and crazy as this one would even dream about such a celebration.

It wasn't the first time the Kings prompted Demers to make a dubious drinking decision. The man who worked a Cal Ripken-esque 2,632 consecutive games for Los Angeles between 1972 and 2006 kept an Olympia beer for more than a decade while waiting for the team to advance past the first round of the playoffs.

But, just like the organization itself, he eventually started aiming higher.

You can only imagine how proud Demers was standing in the dressing room with his son Tom on Monday night after the Kings' Cup-clinching win over New Jersey. After all, this was a man who got inducted to the trainers' wing of the Hockey Hall of Fame for a career that saw him treat Rogie Vachon, [Marcel Dionne](#), [Wayne Gretzky](#), [Dustin Brown](#) and every other Kings player for more than a generation.

"I am lost for words," said Demers. "What a win."

One thing that stood out about the Kings march to their first Stanley Cup title is the number of alumni that started flocking to the games. It felt like the band was getting back together and this championship chase had become about something more than just the 20 players wearing black and silver each night.

Gretzky emerged from the shadows to drop the puck on a ceremonial faceoff before Game 3 at Staples Center. Dionne and former owner Bruce McNall showed up, too. The team's first captain, [Bob Wall](#), was shown on the scoreboard. [Daryl Evans](#), [Kelly Hrudey](#), [Mike Murphy](#) and [Rob Blake](#) were all around in various professional roles, but provided an ever-present reminder of where this franchise has been.

And, naturally, [Luc Robitaille](#) was at the centre of it all.

The Hall of Fame left-winger who is now a team president is the quintessential King. Drafted in the ninth round by Los Angeles in 1984, the Montrealer was unable to speak English when he first came west. From that point, he and the organization could never agree on the terms of a break up as Robitaille had three separate playing stints in Los Angeles and decided to become an executive because he didn't want the Kings to one day win a Stanley Cup without him.

"For 47 years we've tried really hard," said Robitaille.

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How do you measure all of that pent-up frustration? Start with 3,708 regular-season and playoff games, 592 players, 24 head coaches, 13 captains and eight general managers.

The Kings were born in time for the heady 1967-68 season when the NHL doubled in size to 12 teams. Eccentric Canadian businessman Jack Kent Cooke was the first owner and aging goalie [Terry Sawchuk](#) was the first selection in the expansion draft. That would offer a hint at some of the bad decisions to come.

The team arrived with more of a thud than a bang, playing its first two games at Long Beach Arena on back-to-back nights with almost as many tickets unsold (11,088) as sold (11,312).

But it eventually became clear that hockey could work in Southern California. Crowds rose steadily over the first decade of the Kings existence and Vachon, Dionne and [Dave Taylor](#) gave the team some flash to go with those distracting gold and purple uniforms — colours officially dubbed "Forum blue and gold" by the team.

It was about that time when a young boy named Jeff Ohara made a decision that would bring plenty of pain into his life. He became a diehard Kings fan. Years later, the first words out of his mouth after being introduced to a stranger prior to Game 5 of the Stanley Cup final were "I've suffered."

Ohara grew up in suburban Los Angeles and played street hockey under the warm California sun. He has a unique perspective on the organization's course through the '70s, '80s and early '90s — lamenting the team's seemingly endless cycle of trading away top draft picks and chasing stars. He was even among the minority that didn't like the August 1988 trade that brought Gretzky to Los Angeles and took the Kings to a level of popularity they may only have reached again this spring.

Suddenly, tickets were tougher to come by and everyone professed to being a Kings fan. It was trendy. They became the Lakers on ice. Naturally, Ohara stayed loyal to his team but he found no parallels between the 1993 run to the final and this one.

"This is totally different," he said from a booth at the Redondo Beach Cafe, a Canadian-owned hockey hotspot. "This is organic. We've watched them grow."

There was still plenty to like about the high-flying McNall Era, when the Kings were brimming with characters: coach [Barry Melrose](#) and his flowing mullet, Hruby's heroics and signature bandana, [Marty McSorley](#), [Jari Kurri](#), the Great One and McNall, the free-spending owner who would eventually end up spending time in jail for conspiracy and fraud.

That period certainly held plenty of appeal for a kid named Tigran Nersesyan, who immigrated to Los Angeles from Armenia with his parents as a boy. The 1993 Kings had him at hello and he remained a believer during the rocky two decades that followed.

Nersesyan was so excited after a summer that included a trade for [Mike Richards](#) that he laid down a \$700 bet on the Kings to win the Stanley Cup — an audacious play that would make McNall proud. With 25-1 odds, his payout stood at \$17,500.

That potential haul left him with no qualms about shelling out \$80 for a red Devils sweater. He spread it out on the ground in the plaza outside Staples Center and invited fans to stomp on it.

By that point the team was closing in on the impossible dream and Nersesyan's friends had taken to calling him Nostradamus.

"I can't wait to lift Lord Stanley's Cup and go cash my cheque at the MGM, baby!" Nersesyan said outside prior to Game 4.

Then he became Nostradamus again: "We might not win it tonight, but I'm still going to have fun. There's no way they'll beat us four in a row."

He was right. The Kings hoisted the Cup after a 6-1 win in Game 6.

The first call Robitaille made to Richards after Los Angeles stunned the former [Philadelphia Flyers](#) captain by trading for him last June included a discussion about having the chance to do something special.

This was an organization starved for a championship. It was noteworthy that only six hockey-related banners were hanging above the ice at Staples Center — five for the franchise's retired numbers (Dionne's No. 16, Taylor's No. 18, Robitaille's No. 20, Vachon's No. 30 and Gretzky's No. 99) and one for finishing first in the Smythe Division in 1990-91.

But there was reason to believe the Kings were getting incrementally closer to adding the most coveted one of all. General manager Dean Lombardi had patiently waited for forwards Brown and [Anze Kopitar](#), goalie [Jonathan Quick](#) and defenceman [Drew Doughty](#) to grow into impact players before swinging for the fences and reuniting the former Flyers duo of [Jeff Carter](#) and Richards.

Those two allowed themselves to have a quick "can-you-believe-this-is-happening" chat in the dressing after Los Angeles took a 3-0 series lead over New Jersey. It seemed like the Kings were an unstoppable force of nature at that point, which is why most expected Game 4 to be nothing more than a long-awaited coronation.

Well, most people other than Bob Miller. He's a local icon that has been calling Kings games on television since 1973 and he didn't need a refresher course on why nothing is a sure thing with this



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GEICO QUOTE OF THE DAY

"I'm kind of tired of playing like an average goalie, it's getting ridiculous now, three or four games in a row giving up three goals or more. You know I don't care if they were nice goals or guys wide open it doesn't matter, you got to make some big saves to give your team a chance to at least get a point."

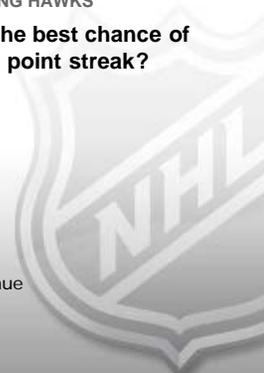
— Vancouver goalie Cory Schneider after the Canucks' 4-2 loss to the Coyotes on Tuesday

FAN POLL: STREAKING HAWKS

Which team has the best chance of ending Chicago's point streak?

- St. Louis (2/28)
- Columbus (3/1)
- Detroit (3/3)
- Minnesota (3/5)
- Streak will continue

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franchise.

"A lot has gone wrong over the last 45 years," Miller quipped to a couple reporters in the press box.

When he was given a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame six years ago, Miller said his biggest fear was that he would retire and the Kings would win the Stanley Cup the following season. Initially, he and partner [Jim Fox](#) found themselves without a spot in the booth once NBC started broadcasting the games in the playoffs.

And then a compromise was struck. With angry Kings fans petitioning on their behalf, it was decided Miller and Fox would call any potential clincher — they did it for Games 4, 5 and 6 — so people could eventually hear the voices of hockey in Los Angeles describe the most important game in franchise history on a DVD released afterwards.

Miller's call in the delirious closing minute on Monday?

"Former Kings players and Kings fans, wherever you may be, all the frustration and disappointment of the past is gone. The 45-year drought is over, the [Los Angeles Kings](#) are indeed the Kings of the National Hockey League, the 2012 Stanley Cup champions!"

It was not only a victory for the current Kings, but also one for former players who proudly wore sweaters that touched various points of the rainbow.

And don't forget the dedicated trainer and his awful beer, Nostradamus and his insane bet, the announcer who finally got to call his Cup and the kid who grew up in a climate too warm for water to become ice yet learned all about pain and suffering from a hockey team.

This was truly something special and different.

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