

Catching up with ?Kitch??a visit with Stanley Cup-winning Coach and ASHOF 2016 inductee Mike Kitchen

Schomberg's Mike Kitchen was enjoying cottage life at Balsam Lake on Saturday afternoon, despite ?the darkening grey skies overhead.? The veteran NHL defenseman and Stanley Cup-winning coach was also looking forward to a round of scramble golf on Thursday morning at Cardinal West in support of long-time friend Brent Morning's King Proud Charity Golf Challenge.

Morning's annual event raises funds for the King Chamber of Commerce Morning Youth Grant, King Township's Lions Clubs, and Easter Seals Ontario to send children with disabilities to Easter Seals Camps in Ontario.

?Kitch? expressed his admiration for the event's inspirational chief organizer: ?Brent's an individual who is full of energy?he loves to be on the pulse of everything. I'm so happy for Brent for all the great things he's done for Easter Seals and it's a pleasure to help out by playing in his tournament.?

His connection to the Morning family goes back decades.

?Brent's mom and dad and my parents were life-long friends. We were in Schomberg and they were in Kettleby?our family was in construction and they were in water haulage. When I was with the Leafs, and Bobby Orr was connected to the Easter Seals, Brent was a Timmy. I'd see him skating with his walker. We reconnected when I was coaching with the Leafs after I finished playing in the NHL. I liked supporting Brent through his Easter Seals skates?then, he ran his golf tournaments starting in 2014. He lost his mother and father recently so it's been an emotional time for him. I just spoke to him the other day about the tournament.?

The sold-out Shotgun tourney is being emceed by legendary Canadian skier Brian Stemmler?a lifelong friend of Morning. Kitchen will share a golf cart with the four-time Olympian on Thursday and acknowledged that ?Stemmler can hit a golf ball.?

Both Stemmler and Kitchen also share the honor of being inducted in the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame.

Stemmler, a four-time Olympian, was inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame in 2013. His playing partner on Thursday, who played for the nomadic Kansas City Scouts-Colorado Rockies-New Jersey Devils franchise from 1976-1984 and coached the Toronto Maple Leafs, St. Louis Blues, Chicago Blackhawks, and Florida Panthers, was inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame in 2016.

Kitch's gratitude was evident when he discussed his enshrinement.

?Being inducted was terrific. I was quite honored. Growing up in Schomberg, I left a small town and played for the Aurora Tigers for two seasons when they were in the Metro Junior B league. It was a great league back then before the OJHL was formed. Rick Hampton and I were only 15-years-old when we played for the Tigers in 1971-72. I went from playing for the Tigers to playing for the Marlies where we won a Memorial Cup in 1975. I never thought I'd play in the NHL. I had a modest goal: to play one game in the NHL. Nearly five hundred games later ? what a run.?

Kitchen's remarkable run as a player began when he was drafted 38th overall by the Kansas City Scouts?an NHL expansion franchise in flux in 1976.

?The team was folding up ? we found out after being drafted that the team was not going to operate in Kansas City. Paul Gardner and I got drafted by Kansas City that year and we were told that an oil man from Texas was buying the team and moving it to Denver to a brand new rink?the McNichols Sports Arena?which had been built for the Denver Nuggets.?

The steady defenseman reflected on life as a member of the Colorado Rockies from 1976-77 to 1981-82.

?We didn't draw big crowds in Denver, but they were loud. The fan support ? when we played Philadelphia in the playoffs ? was tremendous. We sold out the arena for those playoff games, but the team struggled as an expansion franchise. We would have never left Denver if they had today's marketing strategies.?

The Scouts-Rockies franchise was on the move again in 1982 and Kitchen offered insights into how the only franchise he played for in the NHL settled into its new east coast location: ?We moved to New Jersey and became the Devils. It was a big move that took us from the mountains and wide-open spaces of Denver to huge population centres in New Jersey. Even finding a place to live was challenging. We had a different kind of roster in the first year with the Devils. I was the longest-serving player in the franchise that went to New Jersey. My last year with the team showed the promising transformation of the roster when future champions like Kirk Muller, John MacLean, and Ken Daneyko became core players for our team.?

The eight-season NHL veteran highlighted a local opportunity that spurred his transition from player to coach as he resettled into his post-playing days in Central Ontario.

?The coaching staff with the Newmarket Saints of the AHL invited me to help out during my time off work and all of it evolved into coaching opportunities in the NHL.?

After serving as an assistant coach with the Saints, Kitchen transitioned to the role of Assistant Coach with the Toronto Maple Leafs and the Florida Panthers, Head Coach of the St. Louis Blues, and experienced the high point of his coaching career as an Assistant Coach on Joel Quenneville's Stanley Cup-winning Blackhawks teams in 2013 and 2015. When asked which championship was more satisfying from a coaching perspective, Kitchen noted both titles came in very different seasons.

?In 2013, it was a shortened season. We came out of the gates, had a great regular season, and carried it into the playoffs. When Bickle scored the tying goal late against Boston in Game 6, we put out the Bolland line and just wanted to get into overtime and regroup. We had no idea that Bolland would score the Cup-winning goal seconds later. He was such a spirited player. He had that personality where he could get under the skin of other players. Dave played a big game for a guy who didn't have a lot of meat on his bones.?

Kitchen contrasted the sprint to the Cup in 2013 with the marathon experienced by the Hawks in 2015 versus Tampa Bay: ?When we lost Michal Rozsival for the rest of the playoffs, we were down to four core defensemen and the Ducks had a heavy team that looked to forecheck our defensemen and wear them down. We countered by telling our forwards to get back quick on the puck and stretched out the Ducks which frustrated their forechecking. We won a tough series against them and then beat the Lightning. We were an exhausted team after three successful post-seasons in a row. We were edged out of the 2014 Western Finals against LA on an unlucky bounce in Game 7 that bounced off two of our players and over Crawford's shoulder or it would have been three Stanley Cup finals in a row. Then we won four more series the next season. Duncan Keith told me after we won in Game 6 that he was glad we finished off the Lightning in six games. He confided at the time that ?I'm not sure I could have handled a Game 7.?'

Coach Kitchen noted that in 2015, the Blackhawks ?had great momentum in the playoffs?the old rule is you hang on to momentum as long as you can and get it back immediately if you lose it.? He marveled at the Blackhawks dynastic run that he enjoyed from Summer 2010 to 2016-17.

?Winning two Cups in three years?so many players and coaches never get these opportunities?it's so hard to get to the Finals. You need bounces?luck, breaks, and health.?

While winning the Cups with Chicago were Kitchen's career highlights as a coach, his most cherished memory as a player was winning the Memorial Cup in 1975.

?They had won in 1973 with George Armstrong as their coach and we were lucky to have George as our coach in 1975. He helped stabilize our team when John Tonelli left us in March to sign as a 17-year-old with Houston of the WHA. It left a big void, but we battled our way through an eight-game series with Kingston, another eight-game series with Sudbury, went seven games with the

Hamilton Fincups, and won the Memorial Cup in Kitchener. We were fortunate to have Leafs legends like Bower and Duff with us during road trips and they would tell stories on the bus.?

However, Kitchen reserved most of his praise for another Leafs legend.

?George Armstrong kept things simple for us. If we had a question, he'd more than answer it. He never complicated the game. We would play a game of hog to warm up for practice with everyone on the ice. The goal was to keep the puck for as long as you could and he'd play the game with us. We couldn't move the puck off him?he was still so strong. He told us that he learned how to hold on to the puck with the Leafs or he'd be benched for two games. Despite all the Stanley Cups and Memorial Cups, he was a modest individual.?

It's evident that after an engaging chat on Saturday afternoon, Schomberg's Mike Kitchen is imbued with the same quality.

By Jim Stewart