

Jozef Stumpel? Where's Wayne?
By Casey Shearer and Chris Brown

On the Case again. Your favorite sportswriters are back with another mystery to solve. So grab your double-sided hat and your opium pipe Sherlock, and tell Watson to keep digging, because we have a Case for you. (That's what Casey tells the ladies.) Seriously though, we are a little bit miffed because we can't seem to quite figure out what happened to our favorite hockey team. Paul Simon said where have you gone Joe Dimaggio. He only lost one player, we've lost an entire team. Everywhere we look and everywhere we go we just don't know what happened to the Los Angeles Kings.

As proud Californians and Angelinos we are the first to prop up the west side whenever possible. We got more love for Cali than 2Pac. Now being crazy sports fanatics we love our Cali sports teams and follow them with passion and verve. The Lakers, the Dodgers, UCLA, the Rams and the Raiders - whoops we don't have a football team anymore, and, of course, the Kings. We could tell you the names, numbers and statistics of any player on any one of these teams; we can tell you why new Laker Rick Fox chose to wear number 17 on his jersey and we know the bra sizes of the Laker Girls. We can tell you that UCLA quarterback Cade McNown is the second-rated passer in the country. We can tell you that UCLA's freshman point guard, Baron Davis, went to Crossroads School for the Arts and Sciences and wore three different numbers in his four years and once scored 63 points in seventh grade against Campbell Hall when his entire team scored 67. We can tell you that Chris broke two fingers during one play in eighth grade flag football, and that it was the only play he was in on during the entire season. I think you can figure out why we got into Brown. Yeah right, you're probably thinking, get a life losers. In any Case, we're sports fans and we love our teams, but there's one problem. Right now we couldn't tell you a thing about the LA Kings.

A few years back when we were wee lads in junior high and high school we could tell you all kinds of meaningless facts about the Kings. We used to know why Warren Rychel was called "Connie" for about a month. Now we just say, who? Warren Beatty? We remember when the Kings used to wear purple and gold and have those big crowns on their jerseys; no words necessary, just a big fat purple crown on a gold jersey. Straight butter baby. Then a big rich millionaire came along and bought the Kings from Dr. Jerry Buss. Bruce McNall, who was a dead ringer for Bob's Big Boy, bought the club and promised to bring them to the big time. Big Boy McNall's mission, other than to eat more than John Madden, was to sell hockey on the West Coast. He promptly changed the Kings uniforms and colors. No more purple and gold, no more crown. Instead we got black and white and a new Kings logo. Then McNall, who most people assumed thought a hockey puck should come with a hamburger bun, pulled off the coup of the century. He traded about 48 players, 97 draft picks, a fat wad of cash and Casey's false teeth for Wayne Gretzky, the greatest hockey player of all time. Instantaneously L.A. was captivated and everybody loved the Kings. We had Magic and the Lakers and the Great One and the Kings, the Forum never stopped rocking.

We were huge fans. When the Kings made a run to the Stanley Cup Finals in '93 we knew absolutely everything about the team. Chris could've told you as much then about the Kings as he can today about the Buffalo Bills. Then something happened, and Casey personally blames it all on Marty McSorley's illegal stick. The Kings were poised

to win the Cup and then pulled a Bills imitation, folding at the last second and losing in the finals to Montreal. Things went downhill from there. Wins became rarer than a date at Brown, playoff appearances were non-existent, McNall got arrested for tax evasion and went bankrupt, eventually selling the franchise, Gretzky's wife got in a fight with Luc Robitaille's wife and Robitaille got traded, then Gretzky got traded and fans stopped watching. Regrettably we were two of those fans. In the heyday of LA hockey before there were Mighty Ducks of Anaheim and Phoenix Coyotes, we could've told you almost anything you wanted to know about LA's hockey team. Now what can we tell you about the Kings? Well, we know that a frog's ass is water tight. In other words, we don't know shit.

In an effort to expand our horizons and recapture the old flame and love of the Kings, Casey decided to scan the Kings' current roster. What did he find? No Wayne Gretzky, no Jari Kurri and no Paul Coffey. Among the Kings' statistical leaders so far this season include such household names as Yannic Perreault, Aki Berg, Matt Johnson, Vladimir Tsyplakov, Dan Bylsma (I'd like to buy a vowel for these two Vanna), and Roman Vopat. To top it all off, the teams leading scorer and supposedly best player is some guy by the name of Jozef Stumpel. Jozef Stumpel? Where's Wayne? Where's McSorely? Where's Luc? Well, actually Robitaille is back on the team again, having been reaquainted this season. Gretzky's wife is in New York now so Luc can feel safe that he won't be traded again any time soon. But other than Robitaille and captain Rob Blake, no players remain from the last time we went to see the Kings play in 1995. Our team doesn't exist any more, it's been completely dismantled and replaced by a bunch of no name scrubeenies. Like Marvin Gaye, we want to know what's been going on.

The Kings' management says it's rebuilding, and at the moment the team is exceeding expectations with a 2-3-3 record; good for second place in the Pacific Division. Granted, only one team in the division is over .500. Add to this the fact that King management has been promising younger, better teams for the past three seasons and the fact that the King front-office has pulled off some of the worst trades in hockey history, and one becomes a bit more skeptical. I mean this is the organization that once basically traded all-star right winger Tomas Sandstrom for Jim Paek, straight up. If you don't know who Jim Paek is, don't worry, most people don't. If you're curious, he was one of the very rare Asian-Americans in the NHL. Mental Note: add that to the stack of completely useless information that might come in handy while playing Sports Jeopardy file. But we digress.

We need to go to the examination room for this one; and the doctor has pretty bad news. It appears that our hockey team has been taken ill by the condition known in the sporting world as Clipperitis. "But doc, is this fatal?" This disease, once it penetrates an organization, can be extremely difficult to remove, as hard as removing the cheddar from the the grilled cheese sandwiches as the Ratty. Clipperitis is a term we invented named after the NBA's Los Angeles Clippers. Basically, it illustrates the state of a team, that, no matter what it does, or how hard it tries, always sucks. The Clippers provide the prime example of such a team, although the Arizona Cardinals, New Orleans Saints, Chicago Cubs and New Jersey Nets run closely behind. The typical case of Clipperitis leads a team to wallow in mediocrity for years upon years. The teams might employ all kinds of strategies to dig themselves out of their rut, but somehow it doesn't work. Some teams try to build great teams through the draft, by trading for a star, signing a star free agent or

hiring a high-profile coach to whip the teams into shape. For some organizations, with just a mild Case of Clipperitis, these remedies work and their stay in the doldrums of the sports world is a short one, but for others with more serious Cases nothing seems to work. This leads us to the question, will the Kings be able to escape the depths of mediocrity? In short, will they suck forever?

The answer to this question is unclear. In the days of purple and gold and the big crown logo, Los Angeles had some quality hockey teams that fans could be proud of. Then Bruce McNall effectively sold his soul and that of the team to the devil for one shot at the Stanley Cup. But he and Gretzky energized LA and made hockey a success on the West Coast. In a sense McNall pulled the team up with cash and a superstar. This leads one to think that it can be done again. The current King front-office, led by GM Dave Taylor and Coach Larry Robinson, both former King stars, is looking to shed the yolk of mediocrity via the draft and build a solid nucleus of young talent like the aforementioned Jozef Stumpel. Will it work? Well, the team is getting better and the future looks promising. However, we must remember that the Clippers' future looked promising a few times. Remember Larry Brown coaching Danny Manning, Ron Harper and Mark Jackson? Somehow, the Clippers always managed to foil their chances. Hopefully the Kings can avoid the dangerous precedent set by their neighbors across town and can follow the example of their co-tenants at the Great Western Forum, the Lakers who went through a two year down period and are now once again perennial contenders. Will the Kings succeed? For the sake of all the fans out there like us who forgot about loving a hockey team, and have thrown out their purple clothes, we hope so.

You can catch Chris Brown B'00 and Casey Shearer B'00 wearing big fuzzy crowns on the weekends.