

# Hockey Player, Fishing Crusader

## L.A. Kings' Stanley Cup Winner Works To Save Wild Salmon

By Chris Cocolos

One reason why the National Hockey League's Stanley Cup is one of the iconic trophies in sports is a grand tradition.

Each member of the winning team – accompanied by the “Handler of the Cup” chaperone – gets to spend one day with the 34½-pound silver chalice. Some of the stories told of the trophy's cavorting include sinking to the bottom of swimming pools and sleeping with players. Babies have been baptized in it, Kentucky Derby-winning thoroughbreds have eaten from it, and strippers have danced with it on stage.

Defenseman Willie Mitchell of the Los Angeles Kings, the team he helped win the title in 2012, took the Stanley Cup on a fishing trip that summer. Trolling for salmon near his hometown on Vancouver Island in British Columbia, Canada, was only a natural rite of passage for Mitchell, 36, who cares about fishing almost as much as he does his 15-year career in the NHL, including the last three in L.A.

Mitchell deeply believes in protecting the fertile salmon population in the waters around his home, and has worked significantly and is a solutions advisory board member with a Canadian-based organization, Save Our Salmon Marine Conservation

“Fishing and being on the water... that's just home for me,” Mitchell says. “I tell people my front yard where I grew up is the ocean. I feel pretty blessed by that.”

But while there are fish to be caught in the summer and work to be done in con-

servation efforts, there is still plenty of hockey to be played. Mitchell has bounced back nicely as one of the Kings' top defensemen again after missing all of the 2012-13 season with a knee injury.

Mitchell goes on to say that fishing is “my therapy” in getting away from the ice and the always physical, sometimes violent nature of hockey. When talking fishing and the importance of conservation for native salmon, it was easy to get the feeling that when his playing career ends, Mitchell will dive even deeper into his causes and love of the outdoors.

“Huge part of my life,” he says. “I always say to people that I have a busy job, and I wish I could get more involved. But I do as much as I can. It's something I am very passionate about. I'm 36, almost 37, and I maybe have a few years left. So it's something for sure I'm going to pick up after hockey.”

**HIS PLAYING DAYS** have taken Willie Mitchell all over North America, spending time with his home province's favorite team, the Vancouver Canucks, as well as with the New Jersey Devils, Minnesota Wild, Dallas Stars, and now the Kings.

But his heart always tugs at him over the natural beauty of his Canadian roots. Mitchell grew up in Port McNeill, a small logging town (population: around 2,700) on the north end of Vancouver Island. It's considered the “Gateway to the Broughton Archipelago,” a maze of islands dotting the mouth of Knight Inlet on the west side of Queen Charlotte Strait.

Mitchell could have moonlighted for the local chamber of commerce the way

he proudly described the flora and fauna of this area. It's one of the most ecologically diverse areas of North America, with large populations of killer whales, harbor seals, sea lions and sea otters.

“Eco-tourism in our area has just exploded in the last 10 years,” he says. “That's just the way of life.”

And there are the salmon. Lots of salmon. One of young Willie's memories was his father bringing him a protein-packed salmon sandwich to eat before or after hockey practice at the local rink.

“That's all I'd eat, every time, fresh salmon sandwiches,” he says with a laugh.

But as Mitchell has discovered over the years, there is concern about the long-term sustainability of the wild salmon that annually enter and exit the archipelago through a series of waterways and rivers.

Mitchell can just as comfortably take off his hockey helmet and his fishing hat and channel his inner-fisheries biologist to talk about the salmon farms that cultivate non-native Atlantic salmon in the area near the archipelago and Vancouver Island. Some experts contend sea lice have become a major threat to the native salmon.

“These salmon farms sit in the inlets because there's no wind. So the net pens were anchored to the ocean floor to protect the area. But you still have big tidal flow they need to keep the water cold,” Mitchell says. “So (the salmon) sit in pens and are highly condensed. And what happens with this high density of fish in there, they will get parasites. In the sea lice world, they need a source of blood. So they are getting in a lot of wild salmon.”

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Talk about valuable cargo! Los Angeles Kings hockey player Willie Mitchell used part of his day with the Stanley Cup he helped win in 2012 by fishing with it off the coast of British Columbia, where he's from. (WILLIE MITCHELL)



The wild salmon of the area that ultimately pass many of the farm salmon on the way through the Knight Inlet to spawn in the rivers. When the native salmon and farm-raised salmon collide, the parasites can work their way onto baby salmon that have yet to develop scales.

"And scales are what? Their armor; they don't have any armor, and the sea lice get on them, suck the blood from them, and they're dead," Mitchell says.

It's a complex issue, and Mitchell's heavy involvement in Save Our Salmon

can only accomplish so much. He calls the organization "just a basic group of like-minded individuals who are trying to say 'This is our problem; how do we solve it?'"

He wants to educate those fish eaters who have choices when they go to the local Ralph's or Vons grocery store chains around Los Angeles and "make the right choice; buy wild salmon."

His memories of growing up in Port McNeill, those salmon sandwiches, his off-season fishing trips there, have drawn him



Willie grew up in Port McNeill, British Columbia, Canada, where salmon fishing is a way of life. (WILLIE MITCHELL)

back to help. He loves the Los Angeles weather and lifestyle. He'd like to fish more in California when given the time. But his heart belongs back home.

Mitchell got nostalgic during an interview that lasted almost an hour, making it clear he wants to be like the successful

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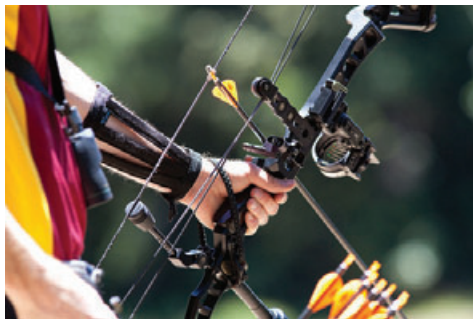
Willie Mitchell (second from right) and crew team up to show off a large sturgeon. (WILLIE MITCHELL)

athlete who gives back. But it's giving back to the outdoors. Fishing, paddling and wildlife watching in the waters around his home have brought much joy to Mitchell, his family and friends.

He warns that by taking away the spectacular salmon fishing, it cuts away some of the identity of British Columbia. Port McNeill's soul would suffer without it.

"The Pacific Northwest is a very fishing-rich area, and I'd kind of like to keep it that way," he says. "I think it's a special place, and there aren't many places left in the world like it."

**ONE OF THE ANTICIPATED** moments whenever a team wins the Stanley Cup is whom the team captain hands the trophy to after he gets his hands on it first at the end of the clinching game. After the Kings finished off the New Jersey Devils in Game 6 at Los Angeles' Staples Center, skipper Dustin Brown's choice during the Kings' celebration? Willie Mitchell. Such a gesture is considered the ultimate sign of



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respect from captain to his teammate; in many instances it's given to a veteran who's chased North American hockey's ultimate team goal like Mitchell had. He was the team's oldest player.

"Brownie's always been a quiet captain, and I remember him saying, 'Here you go, Mitchie.' It was a classy thing to do. You're just honored by that," Mitchell says. "It's one of those things you'll take with you. You're never going to forget that. Friends and family were there, so that was really, really cool."

He was one of the Kings' veterans that season, and he averaged the second most minutes played on the ice (22:14) among all Kings' defensemen. Mitchell was one of the unit's steady performers.

But chronic knee problems weren't going away. He had two surgeries, missed the 2012-13 season, even one that was locked out until January. Reports surfaced last summer that Mitchell was in jeopardy of being sidelined for parts, if not all, of this season, too. Dean Lombardi, the Los Angeles general manager, said as much last spring.

But Mitchell, much like he hopes salmon in his homeland will, persevered. He stayed in Los Angeles with his wife during his injury time, rehabbing tirelessly to get back and help his team's attempt to win a second Stanley Cup (without him, the Kings lost in the Western Conference finals to Chicago last season).

"I think if we had him in



that Chicago series, I think it would have been a different series," teammate Drew Doughty told NHL.com. "I think that last year, a lot of the reason why we didn't get back to the Cup Final was because we didn't have Mitchie."

He's played well as one of the Kings' six defensemen regulars. In mid-December, his plus-minus rating (goals scored and allowed by the team when players are on the ice at even strength) was plus-6, averaging more than 20 minutes of ice time and mentoring younger defense team-

Mitchell hoists Lord Stanley's Cup over Canadian mountains. (WILLIE MITCHELL)



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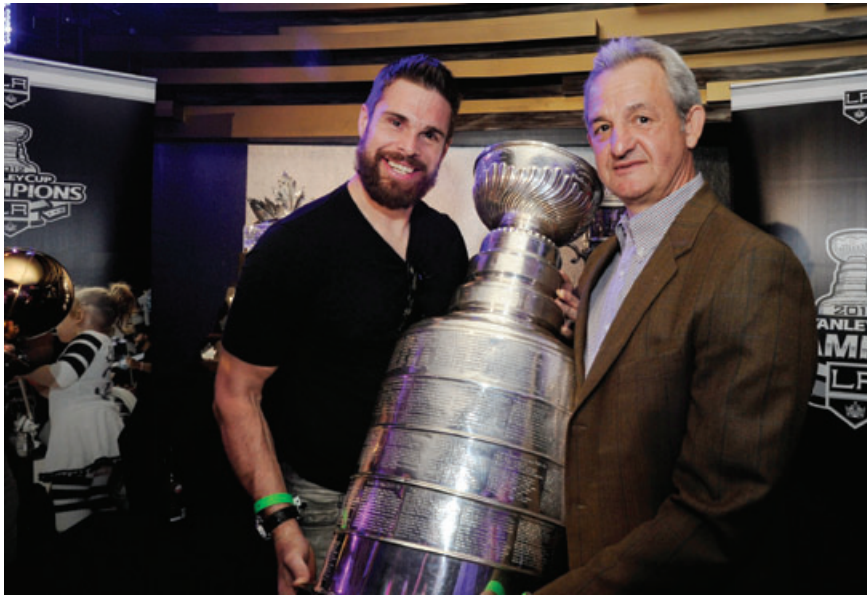
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Mitchell and Los Angeles Kings coach Darryl Sutter celebrating the team's Stanley Cup championship in 2012. (LOS ANGELES KINGS)

mates like All-Star Doughty, Slava Voynov and Jake Muzzin. He doesn't score much (four assists as of Dec. 15), but he provides a rugged and physical presence in the de-

fensive zone. The NHL's series of lockouts and subsequent work stoppages over the years allowed Mitchell to partake in one of his favorite forms of angling: winter steel-

heading, which usually is impossible to find time for during the long hockey season that faces off in early October.

And Mitchell is thankful hockey season runs through June – at least that's the plan he has that his team will still be playing deep into the playoffs – and gives him some summer days to catch the salmon he hopes will continue to thrive in his front yard. He plays for the Kings and loves to reel in kings.

"I have a bucket list like everyone else does," says Mitchell, who is also involved with the Fishing For Kids derbies that support several children's charities in British Columbia.

Kings teammate Mike Richards is a big bass angler, so Mitchell would like to get out more and participate in some of Southern California's freshwater fishing.

"I'm the only crazy one (on the team) who does all kind of fishing. I do a lot of marlin fishing, I fly fish and I was trying to do some tarpon fishing in Florida," Mitchell says. "I would like to have some-



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Steelhead fishing is one of Willie Mitchell's (left) favorite pastimes. (WILLIE MITCHELL)

one show me the way a little more in California and fish."

**SO WHAT WAS MITCHELL'S 24** hours with the Stanley Cup like? He took a sip of a beverage from the bowl at the hotel he stayed at in Vancouver. The next day, he hoisted his prize above his head

atop a B.C. mountain. Far more than the 2,700 residents showed up around town, including an emotional reunion at the local rink he learned to skate in. He even danced in costume with Namgis First Nation members in nearby Alert Bay. There were no swimming pool adventures, but the trophy did get to experience some water sports. Mitchell went back to Port McNeill, took out his boat solo into the archipelago he's fighting to protect, and fished with hockey's Holy Grail.

"That's the money shot, man. If you're a fisherman, that's the one," he says of the photo that went viral all around the NHL's cosmos: Hockey player turned angler has one valuable co-pilot by his side.

As he steered the boat, Mitchell spotted an old friend from town fishing nearby, the boats pulled up alongside each other, and he let the guy fulfill a Canadian's dream of touching the Stanley Cup, this time amid the pungent aroma of sea air and fish bait.

"It was awesome. I took it to my fa-

vorite local spot where I always fish. I think people knew I was going to take it fishing, but we tried to keep it really quiet," Mitchell says. "I too always dreamed of winning the Stanley Cup and then taking it fishing with me. I caught a couple pinks and some coho. I've (boated) up and down that wall probably a million times fishing it, but to do it this time was unbelievable."

At one point, Mitchell turned to the seat next to his and began reading some of the names that adorn the Stanley Cup: Gordie Howe, Wayne Gretzky, Mario Lemieux, Sidney Crosby, Canadian heroes all of differing generations. He is no superstar, just a grinder with a nice career soaking in something special.

"Reflecting on that, it was just one of those cool moments. I love fishing with my dad and my friends. And I like fishing by myself a lot too; that's where it's therapeutic," Mitchell says. "To get out there by yourself, have that trophy next to you and being able to reflect, it's magical." **CS**

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