

[Interview with Former NHL Goalie Gary "Cobra" Simmons \(Part One\).](#)

Feb 02, 2007 | 11:04AM | by Lyle Richardson

Gary "Cobra" Simmons played for the California Golden Seals and the Los Angeles Kings during the 1970s following a lengthy minor-pro career. I recently interviewed "Cobra" regarding his long road to the NHL, his time in the league and his opinion of the NHL today compared to when he played.

Part One looks at his junior and minor-pro days. Part Two (on Sunday) covers his NHL days and retirement. "Cobra"'s responses are italicized.

You were born in Charlottetown, PEI in 1944 and grew up in the late 40s and the '50s. How long did you live in Charlottetown?

My father was stationed in PEI during WW2 when I was born. I left the Island at 4 months and have never been back. Before I croak, I need to see P.E.I. I've been in all other provinces but never the Island. I missed being born in Quebec by 4 months [whew].

I grew up in Lethbridge, Alberta. The Lethbridge Minor Hockey Association was a great place where a kid could play 20 games a year for 1\$.

As a kid, which NHL team was your favourite and who was your favourite player?

I liked the Red Wings and Gordie Howe, in my opinion the greatest forward who ever played.

What or who inspired you to become a goaltender?

I started as a forward and won the scoring championship the last year I played out. The next year our goalie didn't show up about the 5th game and I said I would play goal. We won 3-1 and I was a goalie from then on at age 15.

I liked watching Glenn Hall and Glenn Wyrstok, an amateur who was named MVP of the Vulcan tournament.

I will tell a Gump Worsley story, seeing he has just passed on. We had a preseason game in Minnesota one year and after the game I ran into Gump. He invited me to dinner. We ate and then he asked if I wanted a nightcap. I went to the hotel bar with him and he ordered his whiskey. I ordered coffee. Gump said, "Have a drink Cobra." I told Gumper I didn't drink to which he replied "Kid, you will never make it in the NHL as a goalie if you don't drink."

Minor hockey was obviously different in your youth compared to what it's like today. I'd be very interested in your opinion on what's better or worse about today's minor hockey as compared to what it was like in your day.

I think the cost is very wrong today. I hear it costs thousands for a kid to play Minor Hockey as opposed to \$1 for the years in Lethbridge when I played. Way too much emphasis on winning is pressured on the young kids today in my opinion. I read about another coach, father altercation just today. A coach should open the gate and let the kids play. It is about the kids, not the coaches.

The junior hockey system of today was considerably different from what you played in. How much harder was it for you to come up through the minor pro ranks back then?

When I left junior hockey there were only 6 teams in the NHL, and only 6 Goalies playing. They played every game. It was next to impossible to experience rapid advancement in these days. Back then you started at the bottom and worked your way up. There was no draft then. The junior teams were NHL sponsored and if the one who had you wanted you, you would sign a 'C' form. It meant they had you as long as they wanted you. Slavery, so to speak.

How did you get the nickname "Cobra"?

My first game in Phoenix in 1972, a reporter said I was like a snake on the ice as I wriggled and slid on my belly. Bob Barlow, a center said, "Yeah, he's just like a Cobra". The name was in the paper next day and it stuck.

Did you start out your pro career with or without a mask?

None of us wore masks in those days and in my case I was threatened with not playing at all before I would put one on. The masks in those days didn't let you see down at your feet where rebounds go, so we fought wearing them.

You certainly bounced around a lot during the early days of your playing career (Edmonton, Conception Bay, Port Huron, Des Moines, San Diego, Calgary, Phoenix and Tulsa). What was it like to have such a nomadic career in those days? Which of those teams did you enjoy playing for?

Edmonton was a wonderful experience, Buster Brayshaw was a genius at picking and handling talent. Also they were the power in Western Canada Junior Hockey at the time.

San Diego was a great place to play except I didn't play much. Max McNabb the coach would tell us the first day of training camp that he liked veteran hockey players, so the writing was kinda on the wall. I played 14 games. It was wonderful to play with Jack McCarten there. He taught me a lot about never quitting. He was sure a fighter.

Calgary in the Alberta Senior League was good as it was close to home and I got a chance to represent Canada in the Star Cup in Sweden. I could tell stories about that trip, but it would be a whole other article in itself.

I love the Newfies. What a great bunch of guys we had there. As a mainlander in Newfoundland, you HAD to be good. They had an aversion to mainlanders. I remember walking down the street in Harbour Grace my first year there and a guy asking me, "Gonna git em tanoit bai"? I said yes. As I walked on I heard him say to his friend, "Nudder one dem damn mainlanders."

My first year in Newfoundland, we won the Herder Trophy and thusly played Nova Scotia in the Allen Cup playdowns. On the way back from NS we shared a bus with the NS team and they were asking questions about our league, what teams etc. When it came to Buchans, a place no one ever heard of, a Nova Scotia player asked what kind of town that was. One of our guys said, "A mining town." Their guy asked, "What do they mine there?" Jim Penney, our captain, replied, "Dey minds der own damn business"

I loved Phoenix. It was a western town, which I loved. I still wear Cowboy hats and boots. We had a good coach in Sandy Hucul who treated his players like men. We had the famous Howie Young who had as much talent as anyone I ever saw. He was in his 12th year of Sobriety when I met him. I remember him giving me the 12 steps to Sobriety that the AA people follow. I said "Howie, I don't drink as you well know." He replied, "Well in case you ever decide to start drinking, here they are." He spent much time with Indian youth speaking to them on the evils of alcohol.

Also in Phoenix, we won the Western League Championship both years.

I've heard from family and friends that senior league hockey in Newfoundland in the 60s and 70s was pretty rough. Any stories you can share about your time on "The Rock"?

I don't remember it as being rough. It was wide-open hockey with no thought to defence. I could tell many, stories about Newfoundland. I remember one time, in Harbour Grace, one of our players, Mac Martin, hurt his back. The ambulance guys came out to cart him off on a stretcher. As they were carrying him off feet first the stretcher ripped sending Mac to the ice. The guy in back stepped on his face. We were ahead 5-2 with 3 minutes left. We won 5-4, I couldn't have stopped a beach ball, I was laughing so hard.

You were almost 30 by the time you finally made it to the NHL. Did you wonder if you would ever make it to the big league in all your years in minor pro?

Looking back on it, it was my own fault it took me so long. The NHL team that had me wanted me to play in the IHL. 70 games at 150\$ per week. I was getting 310\$ per week in Newfoundland for 40 games, big bucks in those days, but not conducive to advancing in the hockey world. My 3 years in Newfoundland took me off the NHL map. In short, I didn't play their game and it cost me. Would I do the same again? You're DAMN right I would!

When you finally made it to the NHL in 1974, it was with the California Golden Seals, considered one of the worst teams in the NHL in the early '70s. How did it come about that you went to the

Seals?

In February of 1974, on a road trip to Salt Lake, I got a call from Ken Flager the trainer of the Salt Lake City team, who I knew from Canada. He asked me if we could have coffee. At coffee he said, "I can't say which team, but an NHL team would like you to play for them next year". I replied, "Does their farm team operate in Salt Lake?" He said yes, so I knew it was the Seals. A few days later my agent at the time phoned and said that he had heard from the Seals and they offered me a contract.

Next day I received a call from the GM of the Roadrunners, who told me I would be suspended if there were any further talks with the Seals. I told my agent what the GM had said. He phoned me back and said the Seals would pay my full years salary and compensation as if we won the playoffs again and I could take the rest of the year off. I thought about it and that sounded good except there were 17 other guys depending on me. As it turned out, I made the right decision as we won the Cup and I had a great playoff. When we returned to Phoenix from Portland after the last game, I was summoned to the new GM of the WHA Roadrunners office.

He asked what the Seals had offered and I told him my stock had gone up and that it was never agreed on. He asked what did I want to earn. I told him and he said, "Waaaay out of the ballpark" I got home and the phone rang. It was the Gary Young, the Seals GM, wanting to come to Phoenix to meet. I booked him a hotel in Phoenix and after some discussion and usual BS that GM's spew, he agreed to my terms. We did have trouble with one demand. I asked him what the Seals policy was toward neckties. He said that the California-based team didn't have to wear ties at home and from the hotel to the rink only on the road. I said, "I don't wear ties ANYTIME", to which he remarked that he had 17 other guys that wore them. "What will I tell them?" he asked.

I responded, "Tell them I have it in my contract". He said he couldn't do it. I said, "It would be an awful thing to lose a player of my caliber over a necktie".

He thought for a moment and said, "What the heck," and wrote it in the contract.

Did it bother you at all that you were going to the Seals, or were you just happy to be playing in the NHL regardless of the team.

I was going from 17,000\$ a year to 50,000\$ a year. And it WAS the NHL.

[Interview with Former NHL Goalie Gary "Cobra" Simmons \(Part Two\).](#)

Feb 04, 2007 | 4:55AM | by Lyle Richardson

Gary "Cobra" Simmons played for the California Golden Seals and the Los Angeles Kings during the 1970s following a lengthy minor-pro career. I recently interviewed "Cobra" regarding his

long road to the NHL, his time in the league and his opinion of the NHL today compared to when he played.

Part Two covers his NHL days and retirement and his opinion of today's NHL game. "Cobra"'s responses are italicized.

What was the best part about playing for the Seals, and the worst part?

The best part was that it was the NHL and the Bay Area was a wonderful place to live. I lived there 30 years before moving to Lake Havasu City, Arizona. The Seals were owned by the NHL and that sucked. They didn't want to spend money to get players.

What was it like starting in your first NHL game, which team was it against and what was the final score?

I was 30 years old when I played my first game against the Atlanta Flames and I don't think I had the nervousness that I would have had if I were 20. We won the game 3-0 a good start for me. I remember going after my first year to speak to the Alameda California Rotary Club. They asked the usual questions, "Why are the Seals so bad? Etc". I told them, tongue in cheek, that I had a shutout my first game and was called into the GMs office and told, "You do not get another shutout or win too many games. We like to be out of the playoffs by Christmas." They roared with laughter. Except one guy who came up after and asked if I was really told to lose games. Then it was my turn to roar.

You split the goaltending duties with Gilles Meloche, who would go on to have a pretty good career with the Minnesota North Stars in the early 80s. How was your relationship with Meloche? Do you think the time you both spent with the club affected your skills in any way?

Gilles and I had a wonderful relationship. We roomed together on the road and drove to the games at home together. We knew whoever was playing that night could look for near 40 shots. When one of us would get bombed the other would console him. I was pretty set in my ways at 30 and Gilles played a different style game than I did.

Who were your favorite teammates with the Seals? Do you still keep in touch with them?

Gilles and Mo Mott were the guys I hung around with on the road. At home I'd spend time with Bob Stewart, another P.E. Islander. Big Al MacAdam was a great guy as well. The only time I see anyone is events like the 97 NHL Allstar game in San Jose. I do email Mo Mott from time to time. He is a Professor in Manitoba.

What were the fans like in Oakland? Did they support the team and enjoy the sport, or was it the equivalent of playing in today's non-hockey markets?

They were 6900 of the loudest most vociferous fans in the League. Wonderfully supportive, but

not enough of them. There is still an active Seals Booster club

What was your opinion of the way the Seals were coached and managed during your tenure with them?

The GM who hired me was fired before I got there. And Bill McCreary took over. Marshall Johnson, a Gary Young hire was the coach. He did a great job with what he had and everyone liked him. At the Allstar break we were in Pittsburgh with about 26 games left and 4 points out of the playoffs. Marshall was fired. We had about 22 games at home and the rest on the road. McCreary to my mind thought it was a great place to step in as coach and look good. We missed the playoffs by about 12-14 points as I remember. I never did get along with McCreary as it seemed to me he had his own agenda.

After the Seals were moved to Cleveland, you were dealt to the LA Kings. What were your feelings about going to Los Angeles? Did you request the trade or was did it come as a surprise to you?

First I had heard rumors I was going either to Rangers or the Bruins about a week before the trade. On the night I was traded we were playing the Bruins in Cleveland. Gilles, who had asked for a trade the week before was playing. We were ahead 3-1 with about 3 minutes remaining and they got 3 goals to win 4-3. Gilles had no chance on any goal, 2nd or 3rd rebound goals. He came into the dressing room and threw his stick and mask down in disgust. Harry Howell came by and asked to see me in the coach's room. I went in and Harry told me I was traded.

It was all I could do to hold back a yelp of delight, but I didn't. I thanked Harry and Tex Evans, the coach, and left the room. I ducked back in and asked, "Where am I going"? Harry said to LA, I went out and Gilles was just picking up his equipment that he had tossed down. I told him I was traded and he threw his equipment down again. He said, "Cobie, I ask to be traded and they trade you! What's up with that". I said "Gilles, I speak better English than you."

As I sat there on the plane to L.A., I basically knew my career was over. Rogie Vachon, in my opinion was among the top 3 [if not the top] goaltenders in the league and he loved to play all the games. I also knew that Rogie and Gary Edwards [the guy I was traded for] had not gotten along for years at LA. The next night in LA, I took Rogie aside and told him to play when he wanted and when he was tired to tell me. We got along great and I heard there was far less tension in the dressing room. Rogie from that point played like Rogie could. He was awesome the second half and we easily made the playoffs. I backed Rogie up that year and the next. I couldn't play like that, one game every 3-4 weeks, and it showed. You can practice till you fall but it is NOT the same as game action.

You didn't see as much playing time in LA as you were backing up Rogie Vachon, who was considered one of the most underrated goalies of his era. How did you two get along as teammates and what was your opinion of Vachon as a goaltender?

Rogie, as stated, was in the top 3 if not the best in the NHL. He was a competitor who hated to lose. He faced lots of shots, lots of rebounds, which are the tough ones to handle. He was awesome. Rogie and I roomed together and we had a great relationship. There was never any pressure between us and I was his biggest supporter.

Marcel Dionne was one of your teammates on the Kings, who was considered the franchise player of the Kings in those days. How was he as a teammate and just how good was he, compared to other stars of the era who played on better, more well-known clubs?

Marcel was like Rogie, another class act. Marcel had a great desire to win and he hated losing more than most. He would get sooo distraught when we would lose a game we should have won. Playing with Marcel was one of my career highlights. He was as good as anyone in the League in my opinion.

Which NHL teams did you like to play against and which did you hate to face?

I liked to play against Washington because they were even worse than we were [Seals]. I liked going to the Forum in Montreal. I could feel the ghosts of great players past. What a wonderful experience to be there and also they were the best team in the League and Gilles always played them because he was from Montreal (ha-ha). Also they had the best hot dogs in the league. One time I went to the Forum press lounge and grabbed 2 hotdogs before the game [a real no-no]. I was sitting in the front row eating them and when I got up to go to the dressing room, who was there 2 rows behind me but Tex Evans our coach. We were down about 6-0 after 2 periods and Tex taps me and says, "Cobra, you are in." We lost the game 6-2 and Tex came up to me and said, "You should eat hot dogs before every game."

I didn't like playing the Bruins or Philly because we were an easily intimidated team [Seals] and that was their game. I knew I was in for a lot of shots and screening when I played them. Gilles always got Montreal and I always got Philly.

Which NHL players gave you the most trouble as a goalie and which were the best to play against?

The Bruins, especially Wayne Cashman were my least favorite team. He would be in my face all night. I would hack his ankles, swearing that I broke them, but there he was next shift right back screening me again. I had great respect for him. He took a pounding but stayed put. Gary Dornheofer in Philly was like that too. Guy Lafleur was a treat to watch, except if you were the opposing goalie. Bobby Orr in Boston was scary too. I have never seen anyone before or since that could control a game like him. In my opinion he is the greatest defenceman ever to play, by far.

You played in the NHL during a time when fighting, especially bench-clearing brawls, were more prevalent than in today's games. Do you recall getting involved in any such brawls, and do you think fighting still has a place in today's game?

We had a bench emptier against Philly one time and everyone was involved. It was a real donnybrook. I had Wayne Stephenson as an opponent.

One time in Long Island, one of our players, Mike Christie, was being manhandled by 2 guys behind our net. I had a choice of Bob Nystrom or J.P. Parise, who never fought. Living up to a goalies reputation as not too intelligent, I grabbed Nystrom and he rapped about 5 punches on the side of my head.

The difference between Hockey and the rest of the games is this. Football, Baseball and Basketball, you get in a fight and you are ejected. In hockey you serve 5 minutes and you are out there against the same guy. You had better not throw a sucker punch because he has the opportunity to face you again in 5 minutes. If they take fights out of hockey, they might as well turn the League over to the Europeans, who don't allow fighting, or the girls. There is definitely a place for fighting in hockey. It is a man's game, always was and always should be.

You were demoted to the Springfield Indians in 1978-79 and retired later that season. What did you base your retirement decision on? Did you feel you weren't going to get back into the NHL again, or that your best years were behind you?

I had pneumonia during training camp and was sent to Springfield to get in shape. The coach of the Kings, Bob Berry, had just retired that year and was picked to coach. It seemed he got rid of all the guys close to his age, Pete Stenkowski, Larry Brown and others were sent to Springfield. I was supposed to be there for 5 games conditioning. After the 5th game I saw the Springfield GM and asked him to secure flight for LA. He said he hadn't heard from George McGuire [Another beauty of a GM]. I said, "I was told I was here for 5 games. I'm going back to LA. And if they try to send me back here I refuse because my heart won't be in it".

Another highlight of my last year, the GM McGuire phoning down to the training room and telling Pete, our trainer, "That Cobra gives me more trouble than any 10 other players combined." The trainer held the phone up so I could hear. Made my year.

Also, I had businesses in the Bay Area with my partner Len Shapiro and after lounging in LA for the remainder of the season, being barred from the dressing room as a bad influence to younger players, I retired.

Did you stay involved in hockey following your retirement, as a scout or a coach?

No, I went right into our Pizza business. We were opening them at a rapid clip and there was work to be done.

Where are you living now and what are you currently involved in?

I am in Lake Havasu City, Arizona. My wife, Whysperss, owns a combination Lingerie and Adult

Toy Shop. I ride my motorcycles while she works.

Today's NHL'ers, from marginal players to big stars, do very well financially. What was your average salary in the four years you played in the NHL?

I went from 50,000 my first to \$100,000 the last year 78-79. I would estimate the average to be around \$65,000/yr

Given the type of equipment worn by goalies in your day, did you suffer any serious injuries from flying pucks?

No real serious injuries, the usual stitches, broken feet, fractured cheekbones, loss of teeth, an ear knocked off, hands and fingers broken etc that we all got.

I grew up in the 1970s, and what always kept you in my memory were your unique "Cobra" masks. Did you design and paint those yourself or did you hire someone to do that for you?

My first Cobra mask was painted in Toronto by a guy named Greg Harrison who really got into painting masks. I told him I wanted a Cobra on the mask I sent him. He, being an easterner painted me a cobra with rattles. While I may not be in the HHOF, my 2 masks are.

What's your opinion of today's goaltenders? Do you think they're better conditioned and trained than in your day?

Obviously they are better conditioned than we were. I understand they receive a thick booklet of drills to do all summer. There were no hockey schools when I grew up like there are today nor CD's. I taught hockey schools for 12 years or so when I played and I think they are very beneficial to the kids who attend them. The only ice we saw in the summer if we didn't teach Hockey Schools was in the bottom of a glass.

What do you think of the equipment the goaltenders have today? Does it give them an advantage over shooters compared to your era?

Very much so. It is much bigger and much lighter than what we used and affords waaaaay more protection. So they are better protected and can move much faster. The masks we wore were actually more dangerous because they were against the face and jarred the goalies entire head when hit. I think Bernie Parent got a detached retina from a puck to the mask.

I had occasion to wear Kelly Hrudeys' equipment in 1997 in San Jose. The glove was at least 2x as big as my old glove and the pads were much bigger, 1/2 the weight, 3x the protection and were the same weight at games end as at the start of the game, unlike our old ones which gained 2-3 lbs of water.

What's your opinion of today's NHL compared to the 1970s?

I think there is waaaaaay too much money paid the players in pro sports as a whole, hockey included. Having said that, I can't see me turning down big bucks either if I was offered the same. What I don't like about it is that it has become a money thing instead of the game, players agents tell them not to play with injuries that we had because, for them there are millions at stake if they get permanently injured. If a player is smart today he can retire with enough money that he never needs to do anything again. Not so with us, we loved the game, the game was everything to us, we sure couldn't retire for good after hockey. Today's players are way bigger than in the 70's and the conditioning programs are excellent. In my day they were almost non-existent. Training camp was to get in shape. Now they train all summer.

I remember the 6 team league where after a game in, say, Toronto, the team would board a train for an all night train ride to New York for a game the next night with the Rangers. I look today and most goaltenders never have to play two nights in a row. They hop an airplane and an hour later they are in the next town.

Who's your favorite NHL team today? Your favorite player? Your favorite goaltender?

I pull for the Coyotes because they are the only team we get to see here in LHC. The TV sucks when it comes to hockey coverage. I always enjoy watching Joe Sakic when he plays. I like the way Owen Nolan plays for the Coyotes as well. He checks, fights and is also a scoring talent. I haven't seen Crosby play yet although I hear he is a great player [He's a Maritimer so he must be good].

I like Miikka Kiprusoff in Calgary and of course Marty Brodeur in Jersey is a long time top liner.