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Hockey Hall of Fame: After 'overdue' election, Sharks' Doug Wilson joins his idols

San Jose Sharks GM, one of the most offensively prolific defensemen of his era, joins Jarome Iginla, Kevin Lowe, Marian Hossa, Ken Holland, and Kim St-Pierre in 2020 class





Doug Wilson takes part in a press opportunity prior to his induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame at the Hockey Hall Of Fame on Nov. 12, 2021 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. (Bruce Bennett/Getty Images)

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Sharks general manager Doug Wilson said there were a few reasons why he played without a helmet throughout his 16-season NHL career. He felt the one he wore with the Ottawa 67s in junior hockey was too heavy for him and when he first entered the league in 1977, going without was not that uncommon for players of that era.

Wilson also joked that perhaps he just wasn't that bright.

But the biggest reason why Wilson went without a helmet was that he wanted to be like his heroes. The great Bobby Orr never played with one, nor did Wilson's older brother, Murray, a member of four Stanley Cup-winning teams with the Montreal Canadiens.

"The players I looked up to and really idolized did not wear helmets," Wilson said. "At that time when I broke in — obviously a long time ago — not many guys did."

Wilson, after a playing career that spanned three decades, will officially join his idols as hockey immortals Monday night when he and five other individuals are inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto.

Wilson, who was elected in 2020 in his 24th year of eligibility, is expecting to have over 50 friends and family members in attendance for a ceremony that was delayed a year because of the ongoing pandemic.

"He's a Hall of Fame hockey player, but he's a Hall of Fame guy, too," said Denis Savard, Wilson's teammate for 10 seasons with the Chicago Blackhawks and who was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2000. "There's no other way to put it. He was a great teammate to all of us that played with him. So proud of him. So happy."

Some might have felt Wilson, 64, warranted this honor long before last year, though.

"He surely deserved it," Savard said. "It's been a while, a long time. But it's never too late. He's not the only one that waited that long and we all felt as teammates and friends that he should be in there."

A HALL-WORTHY CAREER

Wilson played 1,024 regular-season games, 86 of which came with the Sharks in the last two seasons of his career from 1991 to 1993. But he established himself as one of the NHL's most offensively prolific defensemen in 938 games over 14 seasons with the Blackhawks, who drafted him in the first round in 1977.

Wilson remains the Blackhawks' all-time leader among defensemen in goals (225), assists (554), and points (779). He finished his NHL career with 237 goals and 827 points, which ranks 12th and 15th, respectively, among all defensemen.

Wilson scored 39 goals during the 1981-82 season when he won the Norris Trophy, a total that's still the fourth-most for any NHL defensemen in one season. The only defensemen who have had more prolific goal-scoring seasons are Paul Coffey with 48 in 1985-86 and 40 in 1983-84, and Bobby Orr with 46 in 1974-75.

“Definitely overdue,” said NHL Network analyst Brian Lawton, who was Wilson’s teammate with the Sharks from 1991 to 1993. “I never thought he wouldn’t be in the hall, but it feels like it probably took longer than I imagined.”

Wilson was selected to eight NHL All-Star Games, and also represented Canada at the Canada Cup in 1984, winning gold, and was chosen to play in the Rendez-vous ‘87 series, which pitted the top NHL players against the Soviet men’s national ice hockey team.

These moments, without the opportunity to play in the Olympics, are ones Wilson cherishes.

“The one thing it does stand out to me is playing against the KLM line and just how dominant they were and how good they were,” Wilson said of playing against the famous Soviet line of Vladimir Krutov, Igor Larionov and Sergei Makarov.

“The level of hockey in that game, I had never played in a game close to that.”

JUNIOR STANDOUT

There were two things that legendary Ottawa 67’s coach Brian Kilrea noticed about Wilson when he first got to the OHL team in 1974 as a 16-year-old: he had a howitzer of a shot and he had a feisty side.

Knowing that he needed Wilson for his top power-play unit, and not in the penalty box or out with an injury, Kilrea asked Wilson to tone down the fighting. The message wasn’t always heard, though, as Wilson still had a team-high 142 penalty minutes in 1975-76, the height of the tough-guy era in hockey.

“He’s probably one of the few guys ever that could score from a non-screened blue line,” said Kilrea, who was inducted into the Hall of Fame in the Builders Category in 2003. “He just had a tremendous shot as well as — which I didn’t realize until after a few games – that he had a pretty good temper, and he didn’t mind dropping the gloves if he had too, either.

“Once he started that I said, ‘we don’t need you breaking your hand.’ He was our power play. But he just did everything. His passing was unbelievable, quick, and accurate. I don’t take any credit for his development. He was just great.”

Wilson had 245 points in 156 regular-season games with Ottawa and has his number retired by the 67s.



INGLEWOOD, CA – 1989: Defense Doug Wilson #24 of the Chicago Blackhawks warms up prior to a game against the Los Angeles Kings at the Great Western Forum during the 1989-90 season in Inglewood, California. (Photo by Mike Powell/Getty Images)

TO THE NHL

Wilson was drafted sixth overall by the Blackhawks in 1977 and was also taken fifth overall by the World Hockey Association's Indianapolis Racers. Wanting to follow in Murray's footsteps, though, Wilson never gave signing with the WHA any serious consideration.

"I wanted to play in the NHL," he said.

Wilson joined a Blackhawks team that was trending in the wrong direction, having not made it past the quarterfinals of the NHL playoffs for three straight seasons.

"He's a fresh face kid and he's a high draft choice and everybody is wondering 'Well, is he going to pretend that he's the savior?' The team was very down when he was drafted," said Bob Verdi, a longtime columnist for the Chicago Tribune now with the Blackhawks as a team historian.

"It was about a day or two, I was like, 'Oh, this guy is really good and he's really respectful and he's really a good guy. He just fit in. Never acted like he was special, and the veterans appreciated that."

Wilson learned from longtime Blackhawks like Stan Mikita, Tony Esposito, and Keith Magnuson.

"My first roommate was Stan," Wilson said. "The team was a much older team. I was one of the few young guys on the team. I was 19. Whatever they did or told me to do, I was going to follow in their footsteps.

"But Stan Mikita was one of the smartest people and one of the greatest givers when it comes to helping other people. I'm not an academic, but you learn by osmosis, and you just watch him, and how he treated situations and treated people is of great value to me."

LEADING A RESURGENCE

By the start of the 1981-82 season, the Blackhawks had amassed a terrific core of players that included Savard, Tom Lysiak, Al Secord, and Darryl Sutter. In subsequent seasons, the Hawks added Steve Larmer to help set them up for nearly a decade of success.

Wilson started the 1981-82 season on a 10-game point streak with six goals and 10 assists. He never went more than four games without a point and from Jan. 1 to April 4, he had 53 points, including 26 goals, in 43 games.

Wilson was voted the Norris Trophy winner in convincing fashion that year over Ray Bourque of the Boston Bruins and Coffey of the Edmonton Oilers.

"We always had certain plays, especially on the power play," Savard said. "One of Willie's strengths obviously was how he could fire the puck. He had a great one-timer up on top in the middle of the ice. We kind of did that a lot, just because of his ability to read plays and also shoot the puck. He was incredibly talented that way."

Wilson followed the 39-goal, 85-point season with a 69-point season the following year. His plus/minus rating went from +1 to +22.

"I thought the following year I actually had a better all-around year than the Norris year," Wilson said. "But it was just a year where the numbers happened. I actually broke my jaw later in that year and it was wired shut for about six, seven weeks after a shot from a player in Vancouver. I missed a couple of games and came back, lost a little weight, and maybe got a little faster. I don't know."



Defenseman Doug Wilson of the Chicago Blackhawks (right) playing between 1989-1990.(Mike Powell /Allsport via Getty Images)

The Blackhawks made it to the Campbell Conference finals that season but lost to the Canucks in five games. It would be a recurring theme for Chicago, which would make the third round of the playoffs in 1983, 1985, 1989, and 1990 only to lose three times to the Edmonton Oilers and once to the Calgary Flames.

“We thought we had a really good team,” Wilson said. “But I do remember the Oilers. You look at them and watch them play and it’s almost like, ‘first team to seven.’ They just knew they’re going to score five or six or seven. They played at a different level.

“But I loved my time in Chicago and playing in the old Stadium in front of those fans. That would have been nice if we could have pushed to that next level, but great memories for those guys.”

THE MOVE TO SAN JOSE

The Blackhawks underwent significant changes toward the end of the 1980s, led by the decision to replace Bob Murdoch with the no-nonsense “Iron” Mike Keenan as their coach.

“They had a coach here who was big on creative tension,” Verdi said of Keenan. “I don’t know how that would work today, but that’s another story.”

The Blackhawks’ new direction represented an opportunity for Wilson to go elsewhere. Wilson, who played three seasons under Keenan, said team owner Bill Wirtz gave some of the older players a chance to choose where they wanted to continue their careers.

Wilson said other Original Six teams like the New York Rangers and Detroit Red Wings, and Cup contenders like the Philadelphia Flyers, held some intrigue. But moving to the Bay Area and being a part of an expansion team led by owner George Gund III held a certain amount of appeal for Wilson, his wife Kathy, and their four young children, Lacey, Dougie, Chelsea, and Charlie.

“There was a group of teams involved. And it was a family-type of determination and that’s how we made the decision,” Wilson said. “With Mr. Gund and (inaugural general manager) Jack Ferreira, it was just a unique opportunity.”



Defense Doug Wilson #24 of the San Jose Sharks looks at the scoreboard prior to a game against the Buffalo Sabres on February 14, 1992 at Memorial Auditorium in Buffalo, New York. (Photo by Harry Scull Jr./Getty Images)

The Sharks went a combined 28-129-7 in those first two seasons. Wilson had 12 goals and 48 points combined in those two years as he only played in just over half of the team's games because of injury. Before the 1993-94 season, he visited Dr. Robert Watkins, a spine surgeon in Los Angeles and made the decision to retire.

“My body was done,” Wilson said, adding that Dr. Watkins told him with “where your body is at, you’re putting yourself at risk going forward when it comes down to making that type of decision. I played a lot of hockey, put a lot of miles on my body, and I was just breaking down. The back and the neck were pretty well done.”

From 1993-97, Wilson served as the NHLPA’s coordinator of player relations and business development. He was a management consultant for Canada’s Gold Medal-winning entries in 1994, 1995, 1996. and 1997 World Junior Championship tournaments.

Wilson became the Sharks’ general manager in May 2003. No NHL team has more regular-season wins in that time than San Jose. A Stanley Cup, however, remains elusive.

Still, Wilson, with his induction Monday – part of a class that includes Jarome Iginla, Kevin Lowe, Marian Hossa, Ken Holland, and Kim St-Pierre, now stands alongside all of his heroes.

“The fact that I played in the 70s, 80s, and 90s, you (come across) a lot of people,” Wilson said. “I played against Gordie Howe, got to play with Bobby Orr, got to room with Stan Mikita, got to play with Tony Esposito.

“You go through different generations, the transitions of this league. The expectations of our great players really follow in the footsteps of our former great players. Our greatest players set the tone about what this league is all about, what this game is all about.”

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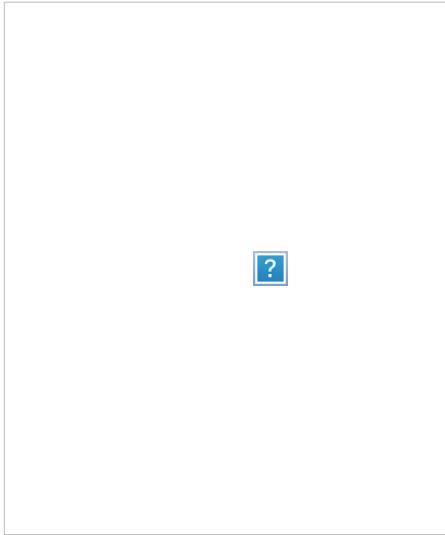
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