

SPORTS

With Belfour, Leafs Still Solid

By Kurt Wildman

The Toronto Maple Leafs hockey club begins its 35th training camp since it last embraced the pro hockey's blessed vessel, the Stanley Cup. And wouldn't you know it, merry fans are doing what they do best: complain.

True, there is plenty of grist for their moaning mill. Goalie Curtis "Cujo" Joseph, rabid for a championship, has packed up his collar and crossed the border to play for the Detroit Red Wings, last season's champs. Many fans view his departure as an indictment of the Leafs' commitment to winning, particularly because their former goaltmouth bulwark rejected Toronto's offer for less money in Detroit.

The Leafs did not sign any top-tier unrestricted free agents and made no obvious, high-stake attempts to secure the services of any restricted free agents like Jarome Iginla. As a consequence, a feeling festers among critics that Leaf management, particularly coach and general manager Pat Quinn, have made Toronto, the bastion of Anglo hockey in Canada, completely unpalatable to hockey stars with the freedom to choose. Commentators such as Prime Time Sports' Bob McCown, were particularly caustic, denouncing the Leafs' failure to match the aggressive overtures of other clubs toward players like Bill Guerin and Darius Kasparaitis.

Pat Quinn, now fifty-five pounds lighter and free from the cardiac arrhythmia which struck him during last season's

playoffs, remains both the coach and GM, a fact that displeases many observers who, despite Quinn's success behind the bench at the Salt Lake Winter Olympics, are adamant that, at best, he can do only one position well.

As usual, you can't accuse Leaf fans of apathy. Still, these are far from desperate times for Leaf hockey. While there is something compelling about harkening back to 1967 when reviewing the hockey club's accomplishments and prospects, examining the trends of the last decade provides valid optimism.

The failure and humiliation synonymous with Leaf operations during Harold Ballard's ownership is extinct. While some questions might exist about Steve Stavros's motives and vision, particularly among people who still question the manner in which he acquired his ownership interest, he and the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan, co-owners of Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment Ltd., have assembled a management team which most observers view with respect rather than derision.

The team has become a regular playoff participant; making the final four is hardly foreign territory. It has maintained continuity and chemistry behind the scenes and on an admirable roster that includes Brian McCabe, Alex Mogilny, Tomas Kaberle, and Mats Sundin. It has shown patience with young players such as Alyn McCauley allowing him to fight through a history of concussions to blossom in last season's playoffs.

It has tried to address chronic worries about scouting and development by hiring the respected former director of scouting for the Canadian Hockey Association, Barry Trapp, as director of amateur scouting. Further, it has compiled a tidy group of legitimate prospects including Brad Boyes and Jay Harrison, both members of Canada's latest World Junior squad.

Arguably, even the club's most critical concern, its goaltending, has been well addressed with the acquisition of goalie Ed Belfour, signed as a free agent from the Dallas Stars.

Although last season's mediocre performance featured one lonely shutout with 27 losses and only 21 wins, his final tour of duty with the Stars seems aberrant.

A broader sample of his stats shows that Belfour has had few peers in goal through the 1990's. An accounting of his NHL honours, reveals that Cujjo is simply not in his peer group.

From 1990-91 to 1999-00, Belfour ranked second only to Patrick Roy in total games and minutes played and wins (304 to Roy's 311). He is second in win percentage (.607 behind Martin Brodeur (.637) and third in goals-against-average (2.42) behind Brodeur (2.20) and Dominik Hasek (2.26). He is first in shutouts (49) and the run away champion in penalty minutes with 298 (maybe that's a bad thing), 120 more than Roy his closest rival.

Head to head with Curtis Joseph over the same 10-year period, playing only 17 more games, Belfour has more wins, fewer losses, 23 more shutouts, and an almost half a goal lower goals-against-average (.45).

Like Joseph, a University of Wisconsin alumnus, Belfour was a U.S. college hockey (University of North Dakota) star who, undrafted, entered the NHL as a free-agent. Both received All-American and other honours in college. In the pro game, however, Belfour has established himself as a Stanley Cup winner and a Vezina (two times) and Jennings laureate. Such recognition remains intangible for Joseph despite his excellence.

It is tempting to gloss over Belfour's difficulties over the last couple of seasons. Leaf management, however, probably found it difficult to totally ignore Belfour's October 31, 2000 guilty plea in Dallas to a misdemeanor count of resist arrest (Associated Press, The Detroit News (www.detroitnews.com), November 1, 2000), the alcohol abuse which catalysed the incident, and Belfour's combative relationship with former coach Ken Hitchcock.

But the 2002-2003 season represents a clean slate for Belfour. More than two years have passed since that unfortunate but relatively minor incident. From all accounts he is eager to fill the role Joseph abandoned for Detroit's greener grass.

It doesn't make sense for fans to act like he's joining the Leafs of '80's. The current version of the club is solid and has its fundamentals in order. Save the criticism... to at least until the first loss. **PRIDE**

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