

Can they make the playoffs?

EDITORIAL

WITH LESS THAN A QUARTER of the NHL's regular season left to play, Toronto Maple Leafs find themselves in a dog fight to secure a playoff berth for the fourth successive year.

It has been a topsy-turvy 12 months for the Leafs. This time last year, the team, backed by the mercurial skills of Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner and John Tavares, were flying. There wasn't a doubt in anyone's mind that, come April, the Leafs would at least be in the conversation as far as Stanley Cup contenders go. Then the Boston Bruins happened. Again. All of a sudden, things weren't so rosy in Toronto.

Now into a new year, the gloom that set in following that agonizing first-round loss has yet to really clear. Mike Babcock, heralded as the saviour when he became a focal point of Leafs' President Brendan Shanahan's 'Shanaplan' in 2015, is gone.

There has been an uptick in form since former Marlies darling Sheldon Keefe took the reins in November. In Keefe's first 20 games as head coach, the Leafs posted a 15-4-1 record, the best start of any head coach in Toronto's 102-year history. Results have tailed off since then, with the Leafs going 4-4-2 in the last 10 games (before last night's game against the New York Rangers).

It's clear that more changes are required if the Leafs are to fulfil their potential and become a bonafide Stanley Cup contender. First order of business for GM Kyle Dubas should be to secure some much-needed help between the sticks, a problem made all the more pressing by Frederik Andersen's injury Monday against the Panthers.

The Dane has played in 42 of the Leafs' 53 games this season, posting a respectable 2.87 goals against average and .910 save percentage. His backup, Orangeville Crusher alumni Michael Hutchinson, has been an absolute disaster across his 14 appearances with the team this season, putting up a 3.62 goals-against average and .886 save percentage. He has backed the Leafs to just four wins since the start of the year.

With the trade deadline approaching, the Leafs could do a lot worse than trading for New York Rangers goaltender Alexandar Georgiev. While the Russian has played in 24 games for the Blueshirts thus far this campaign, he is, seemingly, the odd man out in the Rangers' three-way goalie rotation. Carrying a cap hit of \$792,500 for the remainder of this season, picking up Georgiev could be a real coup for the Leafs. The 23-year-old netminder has played in 67 games across three seasons with the Rangers, posting a combined 3.02 goals against average and .913 percent save percentage in that time.

But that isn't the only position where the Leafs need help. Despite the off-season arrival of Tyson Barrie, and assimilation of Jake Muzzin in his first full season in Toronto, the Leafs' blueline has been a porous one in 2019/20. While some of that can be attributed to injuries ? the team has been without Muzzin and all-star Morgan Rielly for key spells ? the most significant issue is that Muzzin is, really, the team's only seasoned stay-at-home defenseman. If the Leafs can find a way to plug that second gap, perhaps by dangling one of Kasperii Kapanen or Andreas Johnsson as trade bait, the team may be better equipped for an extended post-season run.

Here's a not-so-fun fact, the Leafs haven't made it past the first round of the playoffs since the 2003/04 lockout-shortened season, when they beat the Ottawa Senators in seven games before succumbing to the Philadelphia Flyers in the eastern conference semi-finals.

So, who, realistically, could Dubas target ahead of the Feb. 24 trade deadline? Fans can forget about the likes of Alex Pietrangelo, TJ Brodie and Chris Tanev. While each of those guys are UFAs following this season, the St. Louis Blues, Calgary Flames and Vancouver Canucks are all in contention to make the playoffs, and playoff contenders do not trade top four defenseman. Not unless the offer is too good to refuse. Before you get ahead of yourself, the Leafs simply do not have the combination of picks and

prospects required to make such a blockbuster deal happen over the next few weeks.

Instead, Toronto will be looking at the likes of Brenden Dillon, currently with the San Jose Sharks, or a veteran like Mike Green, with the Detroit Red Wings ? although any move for either of those will almost certainly rely on those teams eating a significant chunk of salary. Yes, despite the aforementioned gaps on their roster, the Leafs still find themselves in something of a salary cap pickle.

Our best guess? The Leafs find themselves a new backup goaltender. Georgiev would be ideal, although someone like Aaron Dell, Casey DeSmith or even Ryan Miller would be a major upgrade over what they currently have. We're not as confident that Dubas will find the help he needs on the blueline. With key members of their current core due back from injury soon, the Leafs will likely hold tight in hopes that improvement between the sticks will help steady the ship.

So, what does all of this mean for the team's playoff chances? As silly as it sounds with the team languishing in and around the wild card spot, the Leafs, at least offensively, are too good to bet against. They showed across that 20-game period what they are capable of playing under Sheldon Keefe. If they put a similar run together between now and the end of the season, they should secure a fourth-straight post-season appearance.

Can this team finally end the curse? While not impossible, we say that would be unlikely. Should they squeeze in, the Leafs will face either the Bruins or Tampa Bay Lightning in the first round. Beat one, and they likely face the other in the second round.

Pull it off and Sheldon Keefe, and pretty much every member of the Leafs' roster, will be handed the keys to the city.

Over to you, boys.