

What Now Leafs?

by JASEN OBERMEYER

Ben Franklin once said that only two things in life are certain: death and taxes. If he was around today, he'd add the Maple Leafs getting knocked out in game 7 in the first round of the playoffs.

Call it déjà vu, a tradition, however you want to word it to get a laugh out of this, it's a punch to the gut.

They've made the playoffs five straight times in a row and each time ? apart in 2017 when they were eliminated in Game 6 ? found themselves on the cusp of getting over the hump, only to be slammed back.

Losing to Boston back-to-back game 7's in 2018, 2019 was awful, the latter when we had a 3-2 series lead and blew it, the ghost of 2013's 4-1 third period lead blown following right behind them. Then last season's different playoff structure with Covid, again, series clinching game against the Columbus Blue Jackets they were shut out and sent home.

We all figured this season would be different, because it literally was. Because of Covid and travel restrictions between the U.S. and Canada, it meant the creation of an all-Canadian division, and a shorter season. It was as if the NHL was trying to make it easy for the Leafs, and still, they couldn't capitalize.

This season they were very solid, they looked and played different, things felt different. At least they didn't lose to a Zamboni driver! They got some toughness in Wayne Simmonds, strong defencemen in T.J Brodie and Zach Bogosian, all the puzzle pieces seemed to fit. They did but were just cracked and broken.

They finished first in the division, sitting comfortably up top throughout most of the season, with only a couple times going on severe losing streaks. Along the way they produced some highlight reel goals, passing, setups, and moves. But in the playoffs, the only highlight is winning the Stanley Cup.

Highlights throughout the season include going on a three-game road trip to play the Edmonton Oilers and winning all of them dominantly. Goalies Frederik Andersen, Jack Campbell, and Michael Hutchinson each getting a victory, shutting down Connor McDavid, collecting 13 goals against one. Jason Spezza scoring a hat trick shortly after being put on waivers from them, then being claimed back. Of course, you gotta mention Auston Matthews being the first Leaf to win the Rocket Richard Trophy as the league's top scorer with 41 goals, including missing a few games and playing some with a wrist injury. And of course, Campbell. When Andersen went down with an injury, he stepped up and achieved a league record 11-0 start to the season, securing the number one goaltending position even when Andersen returned.

But there were problems along the way that followed them to the playoffs. Most notably their powerplay. For the first half of the season, they were a danger on the powerplay, but come the halfway point, they became toothless sharks, getting only five powerplay goals. Lot of fancy moves and passing, not much shooting. It was atrocious.

However, I was excited and optimistic about them playing the Montreal Canadiens, the first time in over 40 years, the best rivalry in sports going head-to-head. And again, the first half they were dominant. Despite losing game 1 and Captain John Tavares to a scary knee to the head incident that left him being stretchered off the ice, they rebounded with dominant 5-1 and 4-0 wins in games 2 and 4, with a hard fought 2-1 victory in game 3.

Then everything fell apart. Games 5 and 6 were similar, Montreal grabbing a comfortable lead, Leafs fight back to tie, but loose in overtime. And game 7? They didn't even show up. They always seem to find new ways to lose. Different season, different methods, but similar results: disappointment. Blowing a 3-1 series lead is truly reaching a new low, especially when (it seems) we were the better team.

Matthews and Mitch Marner, the dynamic duo, hardly showed up. I guess with their big contract they're content just making the first round.

So, what now? Going into the off season I'm not sure what questions they need to ask or answer. They'll definitely have to decide who to leave open for the expansion draft for the newly christened Seattle Kraken. Andersen has not played at the elite-tier level like he used to three seasons ago, and with the emergence of Campbell, that's a decision that should be made thoroughly.

Where do they go from here?

If it's just mental, then they need to understand individual performances don't matter. Win as a team, or loose as a team. Play together or go home together. The big guys got their expensive contracts; EARN IT!

But as the old saying goes, there's always next year?