

The beginning of something special

By Jasen Obermeyer

If you love hockey and the closest city is Toronto, then you probably bleed blue and white for the Toronto Maple Leafs.

This year is certainly one for the history books, whether the Leafs would have been able to win the cup or not.

The Buds' resurgence this season was unprecedented. Their unbelievable turnaround from that painful 2015/2016 season definitely historic. But, one thing is for sure, it was definitely a long time coming.

By the time Mats Sundin left the team and signed with the Vancouver Canucks in the 2008-09 season, the Leafs were rebuilding. Rebuilding is nothing new to them or any other team in the NHL - it's a natural process, one that takes over the entire organization, from the players, to coaches and even GMs. For the Leafs though, it seemed an endless process.

From all their high-profile, sometimes controversial trades involving the likes of Phil Kessel and Dion Phaneuf, to the revolving door that seemed to slap coaches and GM's, such as Ron Wilson, Randy Carlyle, Brian Burke and Dave Nonis on their backside on the way out, the Leafs rose like a phoenix from the ashes, finally securing a playoff spot in the 2012-13 season.

However, that season was a shortened one. Had been a full 82-game schedule, the Leafs likely would not have made it. Offensively they were strong, with superstar forwards Phil Kessel and James Van Riemsdyk to rely upon, but defensively they were weak. Then there was goaltending. Don't get me started on the goaltending.

The team's inconsistency on the back end showed in the playoffs, when in game 7 - up 4-1 against the Boston Bruins with only 10 minutes to go in the third period - the Leafs, for lack of a better term, ?pulled a Leafs.? The Bruins stormed back, tying the game with less than a minute to play, eventually going on to win the series in overtime. It was a crushing blow for Leafs Nation to endure and one that sent the organization on a downward spiral over the coming seasons.

Lets forget about all of that heartache though and instead fast forward to the 2015-16 season... Fresh faces in the form of new GM Lou Lamoriello, president Brendan Shanahan, and head coach Mike Babcock had Leafs fans dreaming once more. Despite times of relative success in the early goings of the new era, the Leafs ultimately finished that season with a franchise worst 29 wins, coming dead last in the league.

Come this season though, the Leafs looked like a whole new team. Led by a veteran core of Tyler Bozak, JVR, and Nazem Kadri, the team was mostly made up of young rookies. We'll get to them in a moment.

The only benefit of propping up the league is that you're presented with the best odds to select first overall in that year's NHL Entry Draft. Going against the grain of previous management regimes, the Leafs actually kept that first round selection and used it to on Auston Matthews - the big, goalscoring centre the Leafs have been crying out for since the days of Sundin.

In his first game, Matthews scored 4 goals, a huge indicator of what was to come. Overall, he led the team with 40 goals, the first Leaf to score that many since Mats Sundin back in 2001-02, ultimately leading the team with 69 points. Though Kessel consistently broke that seasonal tally during his time with the Leafs, it's quality over quantity, along with consistency, that matters in my eyes. Matthews is also a team player, and with William Nylander in his first full season, the two made a great duo - their chemistry combining for 130 regular-season points.

Kadri had his best season yet, Bozak and Connor Brown put up impressive point scoring, and fellow rookie Mitch Marner even raked up just over 60 points.

All this enabled the team to make the playoffs the first time in a full season since before the 2004-05 lockout. Along the way, Nylander, Marner, and Matthews smashed several organization records, in goals, assist, and points for a rookie.

Though they made the playoffs, my hopes for them advancing past the first round were low, as nearly the entire team had little to no playoff experience. When it was revealed they were set to face off against the top team in the league - the Washington Capitals - I thought they might as well start cleaning out their lockers now, foreshadowing a clean sweep for the President's Trophy winners. But instead, Toronto gave the Caps a run for their money. Though they ultimately lost in 6 games, 5 of those went to overtime, one to double, and they were all one goal games. No blowouts.

Despite losing in the first round, the Leafs actually came out as winners in my eyes. They have struck a spark that is ready to ignite, both amongst themselves as a team and throughout its fan base. The chemistry their forwards enjoy is great, multiple players are capable of providing offensive success, not just a few like the Sundin or Kessel eras. Their goaltending has improved with the acquisition of Frederik Andersen. If they are consistent next season, they not only make the playoffs, but they go much further than the first round.

However, it won't just be an easy ride. The Leafs still need to improve their defence. If they can get a top 2 defenseman, then the final piece to the puzzle has been solved, and the Leafs can finally enter next season as a competitive NHL team. Who knows, with a

bit of luck, they may go on to become genuine Stanley Cup contenders.