

May 05, 2013

Written by Thomas Drance
Sunday, 05 May 2013 08:27 -

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I'd be remiss if I didn't start this week's ramblings by touching on the first Toronto Maple Leafs playoff win in the better part of a decade. From the storylines, to the matchup strategy, to the quality of Toronto's goals, to the cultural relevance of the event, that was just a totally engrossing game of playoff hockey.

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In addition to losing games by the dozen, the Buds have actually been an entertaining team to watch for several seasons now. In 2010-11 the Leafs became a surprisingly good team over the latter half of the year, as Reimer became the full-time starter, Phaneuf emerged as a capable two-way player (he was mostly an offensive specialist who could hit in Calgary), and Phil Kessel was on his way to his third of four straight thirty goal seasons (a streak that only the lockout ended).

The next year the Leafs had a well publicized hot start to the season, but were betrayed by their goaltending down the stretch as James Reimer battled with concussion issues. Though this core Leafs group hasn't yet managed to string together a full season of successful hockey, they're a pretty interesting team with a lot of speed, some sandpaper and enviable offensive

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skill. When they put it together like they did on Saturday, and granted that was the first time they've played that well all season, it's a potent mix.

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I [still think the Bruins will win this series in five or six games](#) , but there's some reason to believe that the Leafs may have found a new level of performance, or gear, with the lineup they used on Saturday. In particular, puck moving defenceman Jake Gardiner has been in the press box (or at Ricoh) all year long in favour of Mike Kostka and Mark Fraser. Though they've both been leaned on heavily by Randy Carlyle this season, I tend to think of Fraser and Kostka as basically AHL quality defenceman, or guys you want as - at best - the seventh defenceman on your roster.

Same goes for Frazer McLaren. It's definitely fun to watch him laugh at guys while they throw punches at him, but he's not a contributing NHL player beyond his face punching...

The point here is that in Matt Frattin and Jake Gardiner, the Leafs have now added a couple of fast players who can legitimately contribute at the NHL level. Frattin, for example, took the occasional first line shift on Saturday which allowed Carlyle to get Phil Kessel away from Chara for a shift here and there throughout game two. That's not something that McLaren can provide you with really.

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So long as Frattin and Gardiner remain in the lineup, there's at least an argument to be made that Toronto can propel play better now than they did this past season. Against a Bruins team that is just so far superior to the Maple Leafs at even-strength, that's going to be critical. On the other hand, maybe I'm over-stating it a bit here and maybe asking Gardiner and Frattin to drive play is a bit much. But asking them to be better than Mke Kostka/Frazer McLaren isn't...

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Carlyle handled his matchups well on Saturday and the Leafs managed to exploit a Boychuk-Seidenberg pairing that, yeah, leaves a lot to be desired really. He deserves some praise for that, but how much praise can you really give a guy for taking a break from repeatedly shooting himself in the foot?

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Nonis' reaction to Boston's second goal [was priceless](#) .

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Elliott Friedman used Timeonice.com on Hockey Night in Canada last night, and in particular pulled the shift charts from that indispensable resource up on the big screen, to help explain the matchup battle between Carlyle and Julien. It was easily the most sophisticated piece of hockey analysis that I've seen in the television broadcast format, so kudos to Friedman for the attempt.

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James Van Riemsdyk's game-sealing tally was just a thing of beauty that [I recommend you check out](#). Grabovski had such a strong game on Saturday and really set this goal up by himself by somehow causing Dennis Seidenberg to completely lose his mind on the coverage. Tough outing for Seidenberg (and the rest of Boston's depth defenceman, frankly). I'll be curious to see how they bounce back on Monday...

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As a guy who most closely follows the Canucks, but lives in Toronto, I'm ecstatic for Leafs fans that they're getting to enjoy playoff hockey once again. The Leafs probably won't win this series but no fanbase deserves to go as long between hard-fought exciting playoff wins as Leafs fans have over the majority of this past decade.

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I was picking the Rangers over the Capitals heading into the postseason, but Washington has played some excellent hockey this past week on their way to building a 2-0 vicegrip on the series. The Capitals remain troublingly reliant on the power-play, and that's risky business in the playoffs when you never know when the calls will dry up. It's fun to see Mike Green and Ovechkin being regarded as stars again though...

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I don't find the St. Louis Blues series against the Los Angeles Kings to be dull. Quite the contrary, in fact. It's one of the most physical series of playoff hockey in recent memory though, and nearly every battle along the boards seems like it might warrant a look from Shanahan. The other teams in the Western Conference must watch that scrummy, hard-fought hockey and just thank their lucky stars that the Blues and Kings drew each other in the first round...

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I know you guys hate when we talk Canucks, but they're playing tonight and will be hard pressed to avoid going down 3-0 against the Sharks. The Canucks were the better team in game two and Ryan Kesler had a heroic performance, but the Sharks finally got some bounces in the postseason for once (they were due). It'll be fascinating to see if the Canucks can raise their game in the third game of this series, or if this club's window really is as closed as their detractors like to imagine it is...

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Interesting study in contrasts (and contracts): Mike Riberio has been so good for the Capitals all year long and will earn a bucketfull in free-agency partly as a result. Derek Roy meanwhile has struggled to produce offense for the Stars and the Canucks all year long. Will that impact his market price in free-agency this summer?

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