

Leafs in a World of Hurt

Written by Dobber

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There are two types of teams that poolies like to stay away from: stifling defensive ones and just plain bad ones.

The Toronto Maple Leafs fall neatly into the latter category.

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Over the last several years, fantasy junkies shied away from the Devils, the Stars and the Wild because of their defensive system, the general attitude being that offense goes there to die. They also shied away from Phoenix because they didn't boast any stars or any hope. The Coyotes were held in even more contempt if fantasy leagues carried over into the postseason.

Well, Toronto is this year's Phoenix.

You can turn your fortunes around the long, thorough way – as Pittsburgh has done successfully and Phoenix, Los Angeles and Chicago have chosen. Or you identify a weak season early and turn things around in a year, such as what the Flyers did.

Or, if you are in the Leafs organization, you can identify early that you will be lucky to finish in ninth place, so you throw all of what little future that you have at quick fixes that may or may not push you into eighth. That happened what – five years ago? Can you imagine a Leaf team with Tuukka Rask in the farm system, Brad Boyes on the top line taking over for an injured Steve Sullivan?

The team needs defensive defensemen and a couple of elite forwards – would Jason Smith help with the former? He was given to the Oilers for a song. Would Mark Stuart slide nicely into their corps? Well, when they acquired Owen Nolan back in 2003, they traded Boyes, Alyn McCauley and a first-round pick that became Mark Stuart. Could the Leafs use Rob Schremp in their system? Well, he was available for their first-round pick in 2004...but they sent that pick to

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the Rangers in the Brian Leetch deal.

Before the lockout, the Leafs could buy their way to sixth place and maybe get into the second round. That can't happen anymore and the organization is slow to pick up on that fact.

So the team has eroded over the last three years and what you have now are Mats Sundin, Tomas Kaberle, Vesa Toskala and three decent prospects. And although Toskala is a solid goaltender, how good can his numbers be on such a poor team? Sundin will likely not be around next season, so what happens then? Will poolies be fighting over players they think might 'get' to play on Nik Antropov's line?

That just doesn't have a good ring to it.

If you aren't currently in a keeper league, you probably could not imagine how difficult it is to trade a Leaf if you own one. The reactions:

Sundin? *Naw, too old.*

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Antropov? *Naw, he could get hurt any game now.*

Any other Leaf forward? *Why would I want him?*

In the system they have Anton Stralman, who may one day (in seven years) be as good as Kaberle. They have Jiri Tlustý who may one day be a 75-point two-way winger. They have Justin Pogge who may one day be as good, but no better than, Toskala.

The longer Toronto takes to have a fire sale, the longer poolies will take to warm up to this team. As it is, this is one poolie who would not touch one of these players with a 10-foot pole this year or next.

Meanwhile...

Montreal sophomore Andrei Kostitsyn has shown indications that he will be taking over the Montreal offense in a year or two. He has only been held off the scoresheet twice in the last 14 contests and he has 15 points in that span. His brother Sergei was called up 11 games ago and that seemed to spur both of them on...

The Avs have just 28 goals in their last 12 games – ever since their nine-goal outburst December 9. Obviously hurting from the loss of Joe Sakic and Ryan Smyth, Paul Stastny has just five points in that span and Milan Hejduk has four.

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