

Leafs break their fans' hearts again

Leaves fall in autumn. The Leafs, meanwhile, traditionally do it in the spring. And it's happened again.

Toronto Maple Leafs' fans, without a Stanley Cup to celebrate since 1967, thought this might be the year. Hated rival Boston Bruins were surprisingly dumped in the first round by Florida Panthers, seemingly paving the way to the Eastern Conference final for the Leafs, who got by Tampa Bay in the first round.

But the script went askew in that second round. The Panthers, who barely squeaked into the playoffs in the first place, needing a wildcard entry to get there, apparently saved their best hockey for April and May and well, here they are: In the Eastern Conference final against Carolina while the Leafs book tee times at the Adios Golf Club in Coconut Creek, Fla.

In each of the series' five games, the Leafs could muster only two goals. As they went down 3-0 in the series, the six Toronto goals were scored by players with surnames Knies, Kerfoot, O'Reilly, Bunting, Gustafson and Lafferty.

Conspicuous by their absence on the scoresheet were the names of Auston Matthews, Mitch Marner, John Tavares and William Nylander, the Leafs' so-called Core Four whose offensive production during the regular season (146 goals, 351 points) propelled them to an 111-point season, tied for the fourth highest total of the NHL's 32 teams. This could be the year, Leaf Nation hoped.

But not to be. As both Matthews and Tavares were held without a goal during the entire series, Florida dispatched the Leafs in unceremonious fashion, winning Game 5 in overtime, 3-2, after the Leafs stayed on life support with a 2-1 Game 4 victory. The unexpected elimination of the Leafs caused much anguish not only among the team's executives, but from the two Canadian sports networks, who don't openly root for the Leafs to succeed, but know that their audiences are boosted with every Maple Leaf victory.

But if you're a Leaf fan in misery this spring, save a tear for Boston Bruins' fans, who watched their team get stunned in the first round after an historically sensational regular season, where the B's accumulated more points than any other team in history. You may have heard the phrase 'anything can happen in a short series' and that was painfully true for the Bruins and the Leafs. Defending champion Colorado Avalanche could also commiserate with the woeful fortunes of the Bruins and Leafs, surprisingly getting sidelined by the second-year Seattle Kraken in the opening round.

The Stanley Cup playoffs don't always identify the best team in the NHL. That was undoubtedly Boston this season. But the run to the Stanley Cup identifies the team that got hot at the right time, that avoided serious injuries and possessed the undefinable qualities that separate winners from losers at crunch time.

Maybe next year for the Leafs. Again, the old refrain. Maybe next year.

- **Mike Bianchi** of the Orlando Sentinel: "I just saw where **Sam Hammond** of the Royal Marines set a Guinness World Record by running the London Marathon in 4 hours, 56 minutes – with a refrigerator on his back. That's almost as impressive as the Ravens winning the Super Bowl – with **Trent Dilfer** starting at quarterback."
- Scalped from **Bob Molinaro** of pilotonline.com (Hampton, Va.) **Kathy Guillermo**, PETA senior vice-president, after seven horses died at Churchill Downs in Louisville in the leadup to the Kentucky Derby: "They should play 'Taps' at the Derby instead of 'My Old Kentucky Home.'"
- Comedy writer **Alex Kaseberg**: "**Mark Zuckerberg** won gold and silver medals at a local jiu-jitsu tourney in Northern California. How much would it suck to get your (butt) kicked by a nerd worth \$76 billion?"
- From the Canadian parody website The Beaverton: "Leafs pleased they could find a more creative way to devastate fans than just losing in first round again."
- Comedy writer **Torben Rolfson** of Vancouver: "The last time the Leafs won a first-round series, a few people on MySpace went crazy."
- Headline at fark.com: "**Brian Reynolds** signs the most lucrative contract in Pittsburgh Pirates history: eight years, \$106 million. Meanwhile, the Dodgers, Mets and Yankees are plotting to sign **Shohei Ohtani** for, like, a billion."
- Rolfson again: "Rumour is **Lionel Messi** might be going to play in Saudi Arabia for an insane amount of money. The club is Sportswashing FC."
- **RJ Currie** of sportsdeke.com: "Have you seen the life-size bronze statue of **Shaquille O'Neal** outside of Staples Center? It's just like Shaq, only it's lighter and more mobile."
- Headline at the onion.com: "Little Leaguers concerned introducing pitch clock would cut into grass-picking time."
- **Phil Mushnick** of the New York Post, on the death of CFL and NFL quarterback **Joe Kapp**: "Kapp's three seasons in Minnesota were fun to watch. He threw 37 TD passes for the Vikings, some of them spirals."

- From Mushnick column in the Post: “Quality Control Graphic of the Week was submitted in a screen shot sent by reader **John Longfield**. TBS, an NHL TV partner, posted the Islanders-Hurricanes score at ‘halftime.’
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