

New low for pro sports in Toronto

Published on Monday October 29, 2012



Toronto's four struggling franchises: the Leafs, Raptors, Blue Jays and TFC.

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When the Toronto FC wraps up its season on Sunday, this city will be in a unique position: Four of our major franchises' seasons will have come to an end out of the playoffs, with no team playing and providing any hope for the future. It's just another unfortunate result of the NHL lockout: Normally at this time we'd be hoping that finally, this would be the Leafs' year.

Here's a snapshot of what has happened: Toronto FC is the worst team in MLS. The Maple Leafs sat in first place in the NHL before crashing completely in the second half. The Raptors missing the playoffs feels like the most predictable outcome in any sport. The Blue Jays lost a lot, including their manager and went through a string of PR embarrassments.

We didn't just lose this year. As a sporting city, we got owned.

Which means, of course, there is reason for optimism. Next year can't be as bad as this. Even if all of these teams miss the playoffs, they won't lose like they did in their past season. One of these teams will at least make a run at the playoffs. And in years ahead, maybe it's even possible the city's best franchise will no longer play in the CFL, AHL or NLL.

Otherwise, we just might become Cleveland.

Boston: What Toronto can learn from this city of sports champions

Published on Friday October 26, 2012

Quarterback Tom Brady of the New England Patriots holds the Vince Lombardi trophy after winning Super Bowl XXXVIII, in 2004 at Reliant Stadium in Houston. The Patriots have won three Super Bowls in the last decade.

BOSTON—We are sitting in Pete Colton's bar. Pete's admiring the pictures, most of which capture some local sporting triumph. I'm trying to pretend I care.

Pete's bar is called The Fours. It's the place Willy Wonka would've lived if he'd preferred basketball to bon bons. It's the best sports bar in America. I didn't say that. *Sports Illustrated* did.

If Boston sports have an after-hours nexus, this is it. The Fours sits in the shadow of the new Garden. Literally.

Pete grew up here. His older brother, Tim, got hold of it in the mid-'70s.

Back then, it was "a gin mill. A real, tough hockey bar," Pete says.

When Pete says it, it comes out "hawkey bah."

Like the city itself, it's spread out since then, invading neighbouring buildings and taking over the second floor. It's a brass-plated memory palace.

If the place seems seminal, so does Pete — a Boston bartender out of your subconscious. A bulging, bull-necked man in his early 50s, wearing a crisp white shirt, sleeves rolled up carelessly, a red patterned tie. A dapper longshoreman.

Few Bostonians have had a better vantage from which to watch the rise of this city to the crest of the sporting mountain.

"Yeah, all those teams, they spoil you," Pete says. "After the season the Red Sox just had, people were cryin'. Grown men. They don't know how good they have it."

It's true. Boston isn't what it was, say, five years ago, when they needed to coordinate parade routes between the four big-league teams.

But — and this is key — it still carries itself that way

Like every airport in the world, the departure lounge at Logan Airport's Terminal A has a locally themed souvenir shop. Proof you were there.

Most places stock a bunch of unwearable, day-glo junk that has the city's name splashed across it. How many miserable kids in how many countries are unwrapping something with the CN Tower on it this morning? Like all tragedies, one is too many.

At Logan, it's all sports jerseys: Bruins, Patriots, Celtics and Red Sox. That's it. No Paul Revere. No Liberty Bell. You want Boston summed up on cotton? Pick a team.

This gets at an important difference between Boston and other cities across the continent.

In every other city, the teams are an extension of the place they play. In Boston, the city is an extension of the teams.

Wander around the north end on a Saturday afternoon and you will pass dozens of middle-aged men and women unironically wearing Boston team jerseys, going about their business. It's not an affectation. It's a uniform, even if you aren't drawing a salary from the club.

It's also an omnivorous love. Bostonians don't really care who's playing. They aren't hockey people vs. football people. They're Boston people.

Does the bar pick up during any particular season? "Not really," Pete says. "They'll follow one team and then they'll follow the next one. The same people who come in to watch the Bruins come here for the Celtics or the Patriots. The teams are all so competitive amongst themselves. I think that's what drives them."

We're working our way 'round the bar now, spending a little time in front of each black-and-white photo with our hands clasped in front of us, like we're in the Louvre. I stop at Bobby Orr and The Goal, given pride of place on both floors. Later, I'll cross Causeway St., where Orr's leap is cast in bronze, and watch a steady stream of people stop to have their picture taken in front of the guy from Parry Sound who best exemplifies Boston values.

"May 10th, 1970," Pete says, unprompted. "I was a freshman in high school. I watched it on Channel 38. UHF. They carried all the Bruins games back then. Channel 38."

Boston has this much in common with Toronto — a history of feeling thwarted. Unlike Toronto, they have found ways around it. When Ray Bourque won a Stanley Cup with Colorado in 2001, he participated in two celebrations — one in Denver, and then one in Boston. Sure, you've been traded, but you never really leave (and here a mournful sigh from John Farrell).

The Patriots began this city's decade-long hammerlock on continental silverware in 2002. In the aftermath, 1.2 million people showed up for the parade. The population of the city of Boston proper is just north of 600,000. Everyone, apparently, loves a party. Not like we'd know.

Since then, Boston has won three Super Bowls, two World Series, an NBA championship and a Stanley Cup. In eight of the last 11 years, at least one Boston team has appeared in a championship game or series.

This uninterrupted stream of good fortune has made the average Boston fan unbearable. If you spend any time standing outside the visitor's clubhouse at Fenway — a room so endangered by the passing crowd, it's surrounded by the sort of cage that traps customers going into a jewelry store — you learn to hate them. But it's a respectful sort of hate and, to their credit, they do embrace it.

This front-running polyamory extends beyond the pros. There are five local colleges with huge followings. Put aside the obvious playoff and championship tilts and what's Pete's most predictably busy day of the year? It's in March, when they hold the high school state hockey championships at the Garden.

"Full. All day long. Totally full. Here and at the Garden," Pete says.

Now you try it: name a Toronto high school hockey team. And don't just try rhyming off high schools.

Boston may not always win, but Boston always shows up. They kvetch as much as us, worse even. But they do not let disappointment become despair. They know that once you give up, the team is free to do likewise.

Here's another thing that keeps Boston focused: enemies of some substance.

On Sunday, I drive down to Foxboro for the Patriots/Jets. For some reason, Hertz has given me a rental with New York plates.

Idling on U.S. 1 in the six-lane parking lot that leads into Gillette Stadium, an older guy with a luxuriant white beard pulls up alongside. The windows are rolled down. I'm observing him lazily. He turns and catches me looking.

"Screw you," he says cheerfully. Traffic moves a half-inch and he brutally cuts me off.

Nod and smile. Nod and smile. The front is shifting and you are well behind enemy lines.

Boston's been tilting at the windmill that is the greatest city on Earth for over a century. For the last little while, they're winning. They're the Finns to New York's Red Army.

Who does Toronto measure itself against?

Montreal? Why bother.

Detroit? To really hate someone, they have to hate you back.

Ottawa? Have we really lowered our sights that far?

In terms of realistically competing, the Patriots are the last Boston team standing. The rest are either too old (Celtics), too inept (Red Sox) or too inoperative (Bruins). The Patriots carry the whole load now.

On Sunday afternoon, it's a grinding sort of game. New England should put it away early, but the Jets are inexplicably hanging off their ankles in the fourth. With less than five minutes to go, still holding a slim lead, backed up in their own end, the Patriots

go three-and-out. The crowd boos them steadily on each down. Not disappointed booing. Angry, expectant booing. The Patriots try all variety of blowing it and still manage to win in overtime. The cheering that follows is perfunctory — a warning for next week.

That dearth of congratulations follows the team into the locker room.

Even the golden boys get a rough ride around here, where “enough” is a byword for “more, please.”

Tom Brady doesn’t do interviews at his locker. There’d be casualties in the crush. He’s brought out to the podium in a theatre-sized pressroom. Brady goes on last (coach Bill Belichick has already been on for a grindingly dull exchange that ends abruptly when someone gets into it with him about Cover 2 defence).

Brady shows up wearing a printed, metallic T-shirt that looks like something a wedding DJ would wear and probably cost a grand.

“What is that?” someone sighs in the front row.

“It’s called fashion,” Brady replies tightly.

The guy’s married to a super model and you want to give him haberdashery tips?

For 20 minutes after a victory he manufactured, Brady is peppered with several variations of ‘What’s wrong with this team?’

Actually, someone asks that verbatim: “What’s wrong with this team?”

You ask that after a win in a Toronto locker room and someone takes a swing at you. Brady only smiles slyly. He’s knows more about hysterical doomsaying than the Oracle at Delphi.

As someone who’s spent too many long nights in Toronto clubhouses, this is a looking-glass experience. The guy’s wearing more rings than the sultan. The team’s 10 months removed from a Super Bowl appearance. They’re leading their division.

These people are acting like the bus broke down on the way to the stadium and the Patriots forfeited the game.

They also won’t give up. They continue hectoring Brady for answers. They don’t want quotes. They want to know. What the hell is wrong with this team?

Eventually, Brady flees, mid-question. He has not once stopped smiling. This poor guy is going to have lockjaw by early middle-age.

You leave two hours after the game and drive straight back into gridlock. These people do this every second week. It must be something more than car-related masochism. (David Cronenberg clearly made Crash on the wrong side of the border.)

Maybe the only city in North America that comes somewhere close is Pittsburgh, the difference being that there the Steelers are first among equals. Boston doesn’t make those distinctions. If Brady gets clipped by a bus and the lockout ends, Boston fans will manage just as well with a Cup as they would have with a Bowl. They just want to stick it to someone and then get drunk at Copley Square.

The championships are only part of what makes this the best sports city in America. That’s clearer to you on I-90 (Ed. Note: possibly still stuck there as you read this) than it is at Gillette, Fenway or The Fours.

Boston is the best because it has made rooting for a team its noblest civic duty. You get out on the highway and you suffer. You get into the stadium and you may suffer some more. But your suffering has meaning. It’s an act of contrition. It’s — and you don’t go too crazy on this word — a sort of worship.

They do it better than us. No one who’s ever compared experiences can seriously argue that.

If we want to have what they have, it doesn’t start with the teams. It starts with us.

Cleveland: Mistakes by the lake not exclusive to Toronto

Published on Saturday October 27, 2012 By Dave Feschuk

CLEVELAND—There are some who would have suggested the setting was a bad omen.

But on the day of their autumn wedding, Andy and Kaitlin Incze had the limousine driver park near the wide sidewalk that flanks Cleveland Browns Stadium, home of the NFL's worst team. And with Andy in his tuxedo and Kaitlin in her white dress, the giddy couple instructed the photographer to snap away with the empty orange grandstands as a backdrop. It didn't seem to bother the matrimonial duo that the Browns, now heading into the eighth week of the season, are the only team in the NFL with six losses. It didn't seem to bother them that theirs is a sporting city that has long existed as both a punching bag and a punchline; that it has become best known as a place to be left behind. LeBron James once called these parts home before he took up championship residence in the Sun Belt. Boom-time prosperity was a local resident before the onset of the Rust Belt.

Still, Andy and Kaitlin smiled and laughed as they fake-hugged an imaginary football in a place where sporting glory hasn't often been reality. The LeBron-less Cavaliers have won 19 and 21 games in the two seasons since he bailed. The major-league Indians haven't won a World Series in some 64 years. No city with three major sports franchises has waited longer for a major sporting championship than this community on the shore of Lake Erie.

To be a sports fan in Cleveland is to continually believe in a long-odds miracle, to live each day as an act of faith. Maybe it's a bit like taking the marital plunge. Or maybe not. Consider that in their most recent 15 seasons the Browns possess a winning percentage in the neighbourhood of .320. The divorce rate, at least, hovers at a respectable .500.

"Being a fan in Cleveland — it builds character," Kaitlin said.

She spoke as if she were repeating vows at an altar.

"You've got to support your teams through the good times, and the other times," she said, and by "the other times" she might as well have said "most of the time."

Oh, Toronto can laugh. We can scoff at Cleveland's economic struggles, at its dead-as-cement downtown core, at the once-grand avenues that often appear as untravelled as rural roads. We can snicker at the fact that a Cleveland-based franchise hasn't won a big-time title since the Browns won the NFL championship game in 1964, two years before the first Super Bowl. But Toronto has more in common with Cleveland than Toronto would like to admit.

Both cities have become a place where once-successful sporting brains go to atrophy. Toronto is home to Brian Burke, the Leafs GM who arrived in town fresh off a 2007 Stanley Cup win in Anaheim and has spent most of four years proving he's at best no miracle worker and at worst a stubborn dinosaur a thousand steps behind the NHL's sharpest managerial minds. Cleveland has Mike Holmgren, who came here after leading the Green Bay Packers and the Seattle Seahawks to Super Bowl appearances (and winning the big game with the Packers), and who will resign at season's end as Browns president.

Maybe there's something in the Great Lakes water that makes geniuses go screwy. Since Holmgren took over three seasons ago, the Browns have compiled the second-worst win percentage in the NFL. Maybe it figures, too, that when Bill Belichick coached the Browns, he put up a losing record; it's only since he transplanted to New England that he has won three Super Bowls and coached in two others.

Both cities have become synonymous with fleeing stars. Toronto has seen Roy Halladay ask out and Vince Carter suck out and promising talents from Tracy McGrady to Chris Bosh leave before anything great became of their tenure. The Leaf who would have been doing the city a favour by bailing, Mats Sundin, couldn't be bothered to do the citizenry the courtesy.

Both cities have become places where some of the most memorable, raucous nights at the arena have amounted to mass expressions of communal hate. Raptors fans still pour out their angst biannually when Carter is in town, which is not to compare those boo-fests to the hot-blooded derision that accompanied James's first visit back to Quicken Loans Arena a couple of winters back.

Still, maybe it's not a stretch to suggest Cleveland's sporting faithful — if you're comparing its lot to Toronto's — is currently enjoying the better run. While the Blue Jays wistfully commemorated the 20th anniversary of their first of back-to-back World Series championships this past week — and certainly those crowns have allowed southern Ontario sports fans to feel a little less badly about the ancientness of 1967, the last time Toronto won or competed in a Stanley Cup final—Cleveland has been in the thick of meaningful fights more recently.

Before L’Affaire LeBron, James led the Cavaliers to the NBA Finals in 2007 (and yes, they were swept by the San Antonio Spurs). The Indians, for all their historic hurting, found themselves in the World Series as recently as 1997 (and yes, after coming within two outs of hoisting the trophy, they ceded Game 7 to a franchise from Florida that was all of five seasons old). And while the Jays were pleading ignorance to the Beantown dreams of former manager John Farrell this month, the Indians had already convinced the best free-agent skipper on the market, Terry Francona, to make the move here.

That’s not to diminish the pain that runs through the local memory in northeast Ohio. When Cleveland’s hopes have been crushed, they’ve disintegrated on big stages. They’ve been squashed by one of the most famous shots in NBA history — specifically Michael Jordan’s buzzer-beater over Craig Ehlo that sealed a decisive Game 5 in the first round of the 1989 playoffs. They’ve been dashed by John Elway’s famous 98-yard late-game drive that lifted the Denver Broncos over the Browns for a trip to a Super Bowl; by a well-remembered Earnest Byner fumble that ended another Super Bowl dream at the big game’s doorstep. They’ve been haunted by an 11th-inning error by former Blue Jay Tony Fernandez, which set the table for that 1997 Marlins title. Enumerating all those heartbreaks and more, ESPN once called Cleveland America’s most tortured sporting city.

“It’s up and down, depending on the year,” is how Andy Incze, the smiling groom, put it.

Toronto can’t exactly claim to have been tortured — lobotomized is more like it. Not that the Big Smoke’s rabble hasn’t lived through its heart-sinking near misses. The Jays had their share in the lead-up to their top-of-the-world run. There was that Kerry Fraser no-call on a Wayne Gretzky high stick that might have rewritten the script of the 1993 Stanley Cup final that escaped the Leafs’ grasp by a game. There was Vince Carter’s dying-seconds shot from the corner against the Sixers in a 2001 Game 7.

Tristan Thompson, who plays power forward for the Cleveland Cavaliers and grew up in the GTA, counts himself among the Raptor supporters who watched that shot rim out. He said he still thinks back to the possibility that skipped away with it. The Raptors, of course, managed their one and only victory in a playoff series during that buzz-inducing spring, and it’s been mostly dark times since.

“I was like, ‘Dang. I think we could have beat the Bucks, too,’” said Thompson, standing in the Cavaliers locker room, imagining an Eastern final that could have been.

Thompson was asked to compare his hometown to his adopted one.

“I think both cities, the fans are anxious. Who doesn’t want to win? We all want to win and be a part of something special,” he said. “The Leafs have missed the playoffs eight years in a row. The Raptors haven’t been to the playoffs in a while. . . . But you can’t always ask for it right now. It’s a process. Sometimes you’ve got to go through hard times to really appreciate the good times, and that’s when you’ll be rewarded.”

If he sounded, for a moment, more like a failed executive than a fan bred in Toronto and born of heartbreak, Thompson lapsed back to the latter.

“We could have beat the Bucks. Might have been in the NBA Finals. Who knows?” he said, reliving that 2001 scenario. “But you know, it happens.”

“It happens.” They’re the same two words Andy Incze had been speaking a few hours earlier outside the football stadium a short drive away.

He and his bride met after the Browns home opener in 2007.

“Of course we got drilled,” Andy deadpanned.

By “drilled,” he means beaten soundly, 34-7, by the Pittsburgh Steelers.

“It was horrible,” said Andy, shrugging. “But I bleed brown and orange.”

At that moment Kaitlin raised her voice to reinforce the sentiment: “Brown and orange!”

The limousine was idling. There were storm clouds gathering over Lake Erie. The forecast was grim, and not just meteorologically. But less than 24 hours later, on the first day of the rest of their lives together, the newlyweds would arrive at the stadium with a few dozen of their closest friends and family to watch a kind of deluge subside. After six straight losses, the Browns would actually win. A honeymoon would begin. Hope, false or otherwise, would be reincarnated again for an afternoon. On most days on the shores of certain Great Lakes, that’s about all fans have come to know and to expect.

Which Toronto sports team will be the first to turn its fortunes around?

Burke's Head Stuck in Sand

Published on Monday October 29, 2012

By Dave Feschuk

How close are the Maple Leafs to turning around their on-ice fortunes when the NHL's principals figure out how to divvy up theirs?

The way Brian Burke has told it, they're very close. This is a team, the president and GM has said, that "could have made the playoffs" the past two seasons.

"We could have traded this pick in the draft, gotten a 30-year-old, somehow (squeaked) in," he said back in April.

In case your memory needs refreshing, Burke said the Leafs didn't make the playoffs in either of the past two seasons — they haven't made it since 2004, the longest active absence among their NHL brethren — because he chose not to make it.

Presumably he considered the bothersome frenzy of media coverage and community goodwill that would accompany a post-season run in Toronto — presumably he did a back-of-a-napkin calculation of the millions upon millions in profit the home dates would have raked in for his organization — and swiftly said to himself, "Nah."

Reasoned Burke: "I'm not interested in making the playoffs unless it is a part of a championship. It seems a mile away. That is the goal. Not to get in in the eighth spot, get your ass kicked and stand up here and say: 'Yeah, but we were in the playoffs.' I'm trying to build a championship team."

We only rehash those series of statements because, less than six months after they were spoken, they already rank among the Most Memorable Reactions to Forgettable Chapters in Toronto Sports History. They're right up there with the moment former Raptors GM Rob Babcock called a 33-win season "enjoyable," and the day ex-Leafs GM Cliff Fletcher uttered the words "draft schmaft" — this after trading away the top pick the New York Islanders turned into a goaltender named Roberto Luongo.

Maybe they're only words; maybe they're windows to truth. Certainly Burke's recent messaging has been, like Burke himself, full of contradictions.

A fan could take his most recent in a line of post-mortems as a reason for optimism. After all, Burke was insisting the Leafs were a late-season move or two away from being a playoff team.

On the other hand, a fan could take Burke's words as a depressing comment on the state of a once-proud franchise.

The past year's Stanley Cup winners, the Los Angeles Kings, were the Western Conference's eighth-place team. The eighth-place team in the East, meanwhile, racked up 92 regular-season points — the same point total accumulated by the Washington Capitals, who only used their senseless post-season squeak-in to orchestrate a rousing first-round ouster of the defending Stanley Cup champions from Boston. Doubters of the powers of the eighth seed might also remember the Edmonton Oilers and their memorable spring of 2006. Despite possessing the worst regular-season record of Western playoff teams, the Oilers defeated Burke's Anaheim Ducks in the conference final and came within a game of Canada's first Stanley Cup since 1993.

And yet, given all the evidence of parity — given that the NHL playoffs have become a lottery of sorts, wherein almost anything seems possible for anyone who stays relatively healthy — Burke claims he assessed the Leafs' chances and decided, "Nah."

Given all that, one might assume the Leafs would have spent the past six months repairing the huge holes in the roster. And yet Burke, who spoke in April of a need to "retool" the talent, especially at centre and goalie, has done next to nothing of the sort.

Check that. Toronto did acquire James van Riemsdyk, a career winger who the Leafs have said they may try to transform into that long-coveted centreman. Van Riemsdyk, at least, constitutes a necessary beef-up of the forward unit. And certainly the much-speculated trade for Luongo, who would have to approve a move to the centre of the hockey universe, would be a game-changer in goal. James Reimer and Ben Scrivens, after all, carry around enough question marks to make them NHL unknowns. Luongo's long record suggests he's a reliable horse. In four of the past five seasons, the Leafs have finished either

29th or 30th in team save percentage. In the past five seasons, Luongo has ranked 12th, 3rd, 18th, 5th and 14th in individual save percentage. He'd be a filler of a massive void, albeit possibly a contractually punitive one.

Assuming Luongo arrives and van Riemsdyk is relatively effective; assuming 2011-12 standouts like Joffrey Lupul and Jake Gardiner can repeat their success; assuming Phil Kessel keeps on scoring and Dion Phaneuf allays concerns about the validity of his captaincy; assuming Randy Carlyle, the hard-driving coach who has previously clashed with Lupul, doesn't alienate the bulk of the dressing room by the season's midpoint by trying to turn a roster largely created for a run-and-gun coach named Ron Wilson into a more disciplined defensive unit — assuming all that, not to mention NHL-worthy progress from the cadre of youngsters who've been succeeding in the AHL, it's hard to imagine the Leafs won't be contenders for a playoff spot.

Indeed, there's reason to be optimistic in Leafland. Pro sports is designed to be idiot proof, after all, and sometimes the design even works. In the past 10 seasons, all 30 NHL teams have been to the post-season at least once — even the Leafs. It'll be nine years since the last Toronto-based playoff game came April.

Then again, on questions of playoff worthiness, Burke is clearly the only guy to ask. He's certainly the only human being on this planet with keen enough powers of observation to separate eighth-place pretenders from Stanley Cup contenders. Leaf fans (and Burke's Leaf bossmen) are justifiably wondering when he'll use those rare talents to create a defining moment that doesn't involve a press conference.

Raptors Offer a Beacon of Hope

Published on Monday October 29, 2012

By Doug Smith

There are kids in pre-kindergarten who have never lived the joy of a Raptors playoff game, they have never experienced the Air Canada Centre awash in a sea of red, haven't felt the unique electricity that 20,000 rabid fans can generate.

Of course, compared to their cousins at Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment, the basketball franchise — with post-season appearances in 2006 and 2007 — is a model of success, but that's swimming in a wading pool and probably not relevant to the discussion.

But for post-season-starved fans, those who don't follow minor league hockey or the CFL, it would appear things are far closer to at least a modicum of success on the basketball side than they are with hockey or baseball and since we're talking only playoffs and not championships (it is to laugh to think some Toronto team may hold a victory parade any time soon), the Raptors do provide a beacon of hope as the winter season approaches.

Why? Why in the world should anyone get excited about a team devoid of a marquee face in a sport dominated by them? The reason for the optimism is twofold.

There is a depth of talent not seen for years — relatively young, unproven talent without any history of success, but talent nonetheless.

The Raptors added grit in Kyle Lowry, promising size in Jonas Valanciunas and savvy in Landry Fields to go with a core that was, frankly, underwhelming but OK.

It has given coach Dwane Casey cause to think something good could be happening, and quickly, with his team. He can trot out up to 10 players a night and hope that three or four of them have good enough games to win.

It will take some coaching acumen — not sure he can be sure who'll be good on any given night — but Casey would appear to be up to the task.

But here's the thing, as has been pointed out in several private conversations with coaches, front-office types and scouts:

The team's best players have to be their best players.

To accomplish their goals — and the public one of challenging for the playoffs belies the fact many privately think the playoffs are a necessary achievement — guys like Andrea Bargnani, DeMar DeRozan and Lowry have to be as advertised.

Especially Bargnani, who is the focal point of the offence and the guy teams game plan against. He has to stay healthy and productive, because as much as they talk about depth and wanting to play at some higher tempo, they need a star, or at least something approximating one.

If Bargnani does what he did at the start of last season, if DeRozan becomes as good a basketball player as he is an athlete, and if Lowry provides some defensive toughness, things could get good in a hurry.

The second point is more relevant.

The Eastern Conference is loaded with bad to awful teams and the opportunity to move up the standings quickly is there.

The Cleveland Cavaliers, Charlotte Bobcats, Orlando Magic, Washington Wizards, Detroit Pistons and Milwaukee Bucks are pretty much where, or below, where the Raptors are. They are huge question marks with rosters laden with youth and dubious talent and that, as much as anything, fuels the feeling this could be the year Toronto breaks its playoff drought.

Toss in the fact no one knows how the perennial playoff-bound Atlanta Hawks will do without Joe Johnson or how much the perennially injured Andrew Bynum will help Philadelphia or how the New York Knicks will make a team that squeaked into the playoffs last year better by adding a gaggle of senior citizens (Jason Kidd, Marcus Camby and Kurt Thomas chief among them) and the East is, frankly, wide open in the bottom half.

As one insider said last week: "We have to beat the teams we're supposed to beat and if we steal some other games, we'll be fine."

That means not losing twice in a season to Charlotte, it means dominating those bottom-feeders and it means holding their own when the powers of the Western Conference come visiting.

So what does it mean to reach the post-season for success-starved fans?

Well, they'd revel in the intensity and attention that comes with the post-season, it creates an aura of relevance to the franchise and, if they sneak into one of the last two playoff spots, it means fans will get to see a really good team at least twice at the arena.

And those pre-kindergarten kids who are devout basketball fans can hold it over kids in Grades 3, 4 and 5 who follow hockey or soccer. And they can absolutely kill collegians who care about Toronto baseball.

TFC is the only Toronto sports team set to break its losing record

Published on Monday October 29, 2012

By Cathal Kelly

The people who run sports teams try their best to make it sound like they're tucked up in a boardroom splitting atoms with a chisel, but it's not really that difficult.

It's annoying and it's depressingly public, but it's not hard.

Let's analogize it to your job.

You get to work, and your computer is on the fritz. You call up IT and they tell you they can't give you a better computer. They only hand out computers once a year on a lottery basis. And you traded your pick.

"Why don't you try taking your computer apart and fixing it yourself?"

OK, you say. After six hours of squinting concentration with a needle-nosed pliers, the computer looks like you tried to fix it with a hammer.

Now you work without a computer.

Your chair's broken, too. You call up maintenance.

"Can I trade you this chair for a better chair?"

"I don't know," maintenance says. "How much room do you have left in your chair budget?"

"I'm right at my chair cap."

"Better find yourself a box, then."

So you sit on a box. And your productivity — already scraping the bottom third of company-wide targets — does not improve. Thanks to your useless tools, eventually you're doing nothing, quietly waiting to be fired.

This is how Toronto sports teams operate. They work on the basis that whatever broken down piece of junk failed you last year, that's the same piece of junk you should use at work the following year.

Loving a team in Toronto is living inside Groundhog Day (minus actual groundhogs, which are fun).

Change is invariably slow. Improved pieces are hard to find (that takes real genius).

Most importantly, few men in control are willing to take an off-season life-or-death leap, because while that's the surest way to change a losing game, it's also the surest way to lose your job.

Since everyone around them is total crap as well, it's easy to escape notice by plumbing the bottom of the civic sports ocean, like a Dogfish with a BlackBerry.

This is why Toronto FC is the only team I hold out real hope for next year: because Toronto FC will be unrecognizable come spring.

Having ground his teeth to dust watching the mopes he inherited at mid-season Keystone Kop their way through a year that best resembled Napoleon's retreat from Russia, Paul Mariner will destroy this team. He will reach into its guts and begin pulling wires randomly.

A few factors in Mariner's favour.

He is the only law on that team. There is no hierarchy to tiptoe through — there is Mariner alone.

He's constructed a winner before, in New England.

He was thwarted throughout the past year from picking up players he wanted and the club needed, first by his former boss Aron Winter (a certain Serbian U-21 international, Hacken striker Waris Majeed, etc.) and then by the league (Olof Mellberg). Assuming the league backs off (big assumption), he now has a free hand for the first time.

Here's also what separates Mariner from the rest of the pack — he has no fear. Unlike every other GM in this town, Mariner has already made his bones in the only place it really counts — on the field. He will always have a job if he wants one. He does this work because he wants to win, not because he draws emotional sustenance from sitting in the big chair. That carelessness makes him dangerous.

Who do we know will be back next year?

A renewed Torsten Frings. Danny Koevermans, though his full recovery is uncertain. Cross your fingers for Danny Koevermans.

Goalkeeper Stefan Frei. Fullback Richard Eckersley. Midfielder Terry Dunfield.

Aside from that, TFC players would best be advised not to borrow in order to buy local real estate.

What will the team look like? It will be new, it will be young, and it will be fast. That's a first on two of three counts for Toronto FC (it's new pretty much every year).

Talk to Mariner about the way his side doddled around the pitch last season, and you begin to hear a kettle whistling in the background. He has noted, with aching seriousness, that given a month of hard training, he could have featured in this year's side. One wishes he had.

Lastly, though watching Toronto FC play would convince you otherwise, MLS is the most encouragingly worst-to-first league going. In 2010, Houston was close to dead last in the league. The next year, they were in the championship game.

In 2011, Vancouver was wandering around the basement looking for a light switch. This year, they (groan) made the playoffs and beyond that, who knows?

Change happens fast in MLS. You must to be willing to change with it.

Since I believe Paul Mariner and Toronto FC are willing to build a controlled fire and burn this wretched side down to charcoal briquettes, I also believe they can be a contender in 2013.

Blue Jays have to suck it up and roll the dice like riverboat gamblers

Published on Monday October 29, 2012

By Richard Griffin

There could be good news in this survey for Toronto, a real chance to move up in the “worst sports city” rankings if Brooklyn was to go after and land for themselves a bad baseball team, say the Astros, to join the Nets and the Islanders in the surging New York sports borough. But that’s not likely.

The Jays in 2012 suffered through arguably the most depressing season since ’04 when they lost 94 games. That was the season Vernon Wells started to suck; Roy Halladay had his shin broken by a Kevin Mench line drive; Carlos Delgado was playing out his contract with no chance of coming back; Jason Frasor was the closer and Gregg Zaun was the starting catcher. So things could be worse.

What are the Jays’ chances of improving significantly in 2013? Should be good, given that the Yankees ended their season in disarray and seem intent on slashing payroll, that the Red Sox finished last and are now managed by John Farrell, that the O’s had a surprising breakthrough, one that is historically, in pro sports, followed by a lull and that the Rays, as solid as they seem, can barely support their current roster in terms of payroll. It would seem that with some judicious personnel moves, the Jays have a chance to move up quickly. But will they roll the dice? Aye, there’s the rub.

General manager Alex Anthopoulos has shown a knack for manipulating the June draft and for signing very young prospects from the Caribbean rim, but none of those good prospects drafted or signed in the three years of his GM tenure is ready to contribute to the Jays major-league effort, so where does that leave them in terms of transforming into instant contenders — or must fans wait until the Noah Syndergaard, Aaron Sanchez, Justin Nicolino, et al crops ripen and are harvested?

Fans are tired of waiting for contention. In fact, some of the key players who bought into A.A.’s promises are tired of waiting for contention — especially right fielder Jose Bautista.

If the Jays made no trades or signings of significance this winter and headed to spring training with the same roster they have now, it would be a disaster. It would be another losing season.

C-J.P. Arencibia and Jeff Mathis; 1B-Edwin Encarnacion and Adam Lind; 2B-Mike Aviles and Adeiny Hechavarria; 3B-Brett Lawrie; SS-Yunel Escobar; LF-Rajai Davis and Anthony Gose; CF-Colby Rasmus; RF-Bautista and DH-Lind.

Rotation: Brandon Morrow, Ricky Romero, Henderson Alvarez, J.A. Happ and someone else; Bullpen: Casey Janssen, Sergio Santos, Steve Delabar, Brad Lincoln, Aaron Loup and Brett Cecil.

Obviously that major-league lineup is not good enough to win and the fact is the Jays need to contend now. It’s year four of the Anthopoulos regime and other than throbbing, thriving rosters at various minor-league levels, it seems a repeat of the J.P. Ricciardi Era. Great hope and promise in the first two years and a pratfall in the third season. How does A.A. make his era stand out. Just win, baby.

This space is not suggesting, as many readers accuse us of doing, that the Jays go out and just spend money for the sake of spending money. No, the GM has already said that he will target certain elite players, especially pitchers, and if he does not get them, he will not go after Options B-C-D just to say he did something. That’s a solid plan, only there are factors that preclude them from succeeding.

First, the Jays have to become flexible when it comes to offering contracts longer than five years. That’s a policy that president Paul Beeston had reinstituted upon his return to the ball club, especially after the disaster of Vernon Wells and his seven years, \$126-million salary. That was a bad contract, but just because you are coming off a bad marriage doesn’t mean you give up on women.

The Jays must be flexible and if there is a free-agent in his late 20s or early 30s wherein a contract of more than five years is necessary to seal the deal, then do it. But, remember, we are counting on the smarts of the Jays' current front office in being able to pinpoint the right players.

The Jays must correct the image of being a small market. That affects fans, but it also affects players when it comes to signing with the Jays. Earlier in October, a Reds fan asked, "Is Toronto bigger than Cincinnati?"

Perceptions like that aren't helped at all by the Jays acting, since the World Series' years and the strike that followed in 1994, like they need revenue-sharing and are a struggling medium market. That was when the Canadian dollar was worth 63 cents. The times they are a changing.

Can the Jays compete in 2013? Consider the Tigers are in the Fall Classic with 88 wins, the 11th highest victory total in the majors. There are five teams out of 15 that qualify for the playoffs. That's certainly not NHL or NBA style where 16 of 30 are on the post-season dance-floor, but good enough.

Can the Jays compete in 2013? Yes, but only if they target and sign or trade for two top of the rotation starters and convince the baseball world they are serious about winning right here, right now. Optimism, swagger and rolling the dice intelligently, but with no guarantees will go a long way toward changing the image of the Jays. Because right now, the Jays are the punchline of a bad joke.

When it comes to sports, Toronto is a city of losers

JEFFREY SIMPSON

The Globe and Mail

Published Saturday, Apr. 10 2010, 5:00 AM EDT

Last updated Thursday, Sep. 06 2012, 4:05 PM EDT

The question deserves asking again, after another terrible season for the Maple Leafs and as another dreadful one beckons for the Blue Jays: Why are Toronto sports teams the worst collectively in North America?

On the ice, field and court, Toronto teams are mediocre-to-awful, year after year. Together, they are the poorest performing group of sports teams of any city in North America.

Go ahead. Name another market of comparable size where all major-league teams are consistently so bad. Washington? The city's baseball, football and basketball teams are poor, but the hockey team is arguably the best. Detroit? The baseball, football and basketball teams struggle horribly, but the hockey is consistently championship-calibre or close. No, Toronto is the worst.

The Maple Leafs, we are told, have a promising future. We are always told that toward the end of the season when the Leafs win some games, mostly against teams that are taking the night off against a weak opponent. Still, the Toronto media - and national media - lavish such attention on Toronto, while playing down coverage of much better teams, that one supposes they have to say something. So why not another dose of false optimism?

The Leafs, under the guidance of their new general manager Brian Burke, actually went backward this year. They got 81 points in 2009 and finished seventh from the bottom overall; this year, they will finish with even fewer points and wind up second-worst overall. And, by the way, the Leafs have traded their first-round draft pick for this year and next year, plus this year's second-round pick.

The Blue Jays had 75 wins and 87 losses last season. They look bad again this year, and will be lucky to match last year's number of victories. The doleful legacy effects of the Paul Godfrey/J.P. Ricciardi in the senior management positions will be felt for years to come.

The Toronto Argonauts were the laughingstock of the Canadian Football League in 2009, winning three and losing 15.

Last season the Toronto Raptors basketball team won 33 games and lost 49. This year, they hover around .500, which for a Toronto sports team represents almost a championship season.

So what is it about Toronto? Why do the city's teams stink? And why do their fans, especially those of the Maple Leafs, stick with such losers, when fans in other cities would be in full howl all the time, and many would refuse to attend games.

That fans stick with the Leafs is part of the problem. (At least fans have been deserting the Blue Jays in disgust at their performance). Year after year, Leafs' management knows it can put chopped meat on the ice and still the Air Canada Centre will be sold out, with astronomically high ticket prices. The Ontario Teachers Pension Plan and the other owners can't fail to make money, so maybe they just don't care very much. Or maybe they do, but they are just not very bright.

If the Leafs were a car, "Leaf Nation" would have traded it in years ago. If the team were a television station, fans would have switched the channel. If the Buds were a stock broker who consistently lost their money, fans would have headed somewhere else. If a restaurant consistently served bad food, would the patrons keep coming?

A woman in Nova Scotia once summed up the craziness of it all at a reception. Asked for her hockey team, she said the Leafs. Asked why she continued to support mediocrity, she shrugged and said rather defiantly, "I've ditched my husband and lost my job, but I can't abandon the Leafs." There's nothing rational in rewarding failure; indeed, rewarding failure with such misplaced and raucous passion invites more failure. It could even be said that nowhere in professional sports are fans less humble with so much to be humble about.

An excuse once offered was the Canadian dollar. Its low level meant expenditures in U.S. currency but revenues in Canadian money, but that didn't explain why other Canadian hockey teams were better than the Leafs, since they all faced the same challenge. Of late, the Canadian dollar excuse has disappeared.

Ownership obviously counts in explaining consistent failure, since ultimately ownership and senior management over the long term are more responsible than any part of the company for its performance.

Yet shame never seemed to influence the behaviour of the owners of Toronto sports teams, who carried on clipping coupons while their teams sagged. They knew they operated in an apparently gullible and masochistic market that thought of itself as "world class," a favourite Toronto self-appellation, but too often settled for second-best.

Some day, presumably, one of Toronto's teams will again be strong - strong enough to at least make the playoffs. That day, however, looks a long way off.

In the meantime, Toronto remains indisputably the city of sports losers.

Toronto: The Worst Sports City in the World

No currency-exchange jokes here — just cold hard truth from one of our Canadian friends

By [Stephen Marche](#) on September 27, 2011

his past summer, ESPN The Magazine, in its annual ranking of sports franchises, [identified Toronto as the worst city for sports in North America](#). Inevitably, the assessment provoked a fury of denial. Brian Burke, the Toronto Maple Leafs' president and general manager (and probably the best executive in the NHL) called the ranking, "absurd and offensive" and went on to claim, "I don't think ESPN knows squat about Canada. I don't think they know squat about hockey." I suppose Burke had to say that, being GM and all, but it was still an embarrassing comment. No sane person could disagree with that ranking. As Burke must know, the only problem with ESPN's analysis is that it focused almost exclusively on quantitative matters, the "bang for the buck," meaning the money gathered from tickets, concessions, and parking compared against the team's wins. Being a Toronto fan is so much worse than any algorithm could ever express. A merely numerical measurement fails to capture the daily spiritual trauma of following sports in Toronto.

It's a given that the true fan goes to games not for the necessarily occasional thrill of winning, but for the quotidian experience of losing — a truth articulated originally and beautifully by Nick Hornby in *Fever Pitch*. Losing in Toronto, however, is an unrelenting condition. The CFL team, the Argonauts, is so bad that when I recently found a friend of mine betting on it, I immediately wondered if it was time for an intervention about his gambling addiction. As it stands, the Argonauts are 2 and 6 3 and 9. The Blue Jays this year aren't completely terrible, but when you've said that, you've said everything. They may be a rising power in the East, as many claim, but they sure haven't risen yet. The Raptors are still in their post-Bosh wilderness (not that the Bosh period was a golden age), and Toronto FC currently rests at the bottom of the Eastern Conference. The Leafs, who matter to Torontonians more than all the other teams combined, have not won the Stanley Cup since 1967, and they haven't made the playoffs in a franchise-record six seasons. The only team with a longer dry spell is the Florida Panthers. The Leafs' major source of hope seems to be Brian Burke himself, but when the major source of your dreams is a front-office guy, you are in a dark place. Cheering a GM, to me, is hitting rock bottom.

And this in Canada's biggest city, where hockey matters more than baseball in Boston or basketball in Indiana or football in Texas. The only other places where sports dwell so near the most profound and abiding national questions are rugby in New Zealand, which recoups the warrior culture of the Maori, and football in Buenos Aires, where the slumdog Boca Juniors battle the uptown Millionarios in a never-ending class war. Maybe Real Madrid against Barcelona could be added to that list, but nobody else. People who were surprised that Vancouver burned after the Stanley Cup playoffs last year are unaware of the history of the sport in Canada. Of the 10 biggest riots in Canadian history, six began at hockey games.

During the 2010 Olympics, more than 80 percent of the country watched the men's hockey finals. Our current Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, is legitimately an expert on the history of the game; the only reason he hasn't finished his book on the early days of the NHL is that he's been busy running the country. The history of the game and the history of the country are much the same thing: You can trace the rise of Quebec separatism, for example, to the Rocket Richard riots in 1955. On the other hand, hockey is the one mass-media phenomenon for which English and French Canadian have the same stars — not true of any other form of entertainment. Immigrants join hockey as fans and players as soon as they join the Canadian middle class. More than a hundred thousand people watch Hockey Night in Canada broadcast in Punjabi.

All of which is to say, we are so terrible when we should be so great. I wish I could say that the misery in Toronto follows that simple equation: the size of our passion divided by the grossness of our losses. Unfortunately, the torture of watching hockey in Toronto is nowhere near so easy. Everybody knows that Toronto loses not despite our love for the game, but because of our love for the game. The truism is by now well established, a local media commonplace. "Each man kills the thing he loves," as

Oscar Wilde put it. The teams lose because they don't have to win. The Leafs have so many people on the waiting list for season tickets that they don't take new names anymore; no matter what happens they have a 99 percent renewal rate. Torontonians line up to pay tens of thousands of dollars to watch some of the most dreadful hockey played at a professional level.

So who can blame Maple Leafs Sports and Entertainment, the business that controls the Leafs and the Raptors, for following that oldest and truest of rules: Never give a sucker an even break? The most recently released financial reports, published by the Toronto Star in 2007 and which were neither confirmed nor denied by the privately held MLSE, suggest they run a profit margin of more than 20 percent. Before we start hacking away at the irresponsible evil-capitalist angle, however, we should recognize that the majority shareholder in MLSE is the Ontario Teachers' Pension Fund (although they are currently looking to sell); the profits of MLSE have paid for the retirement of a lot of hardworking people, so it's good that they're good at business. And they are excellent business people.

Nonetheless, I don't know how the executives at MLSE eat and sleep and walk around knowing how egregiously and consistently they have failed their city. For the past 14 years, the head of MLSE has been Richard Peddie, a mostly cheerful public figure with a hefty amount of charm and a disarming sense of humor. Of course, part of me wants to pin all those 14 disastrous years of failure on him. His retirement agreement stipulates that if Toronto wins the Stanley Cup in the next three years, he receives a championship ring. I have a better idea of how we should celebrate his upcoming departure: with an inverted statue, his image carved underground, a Peddie-shaped hole that all the fans could fill with leftover beer (or borrowed beer) in commemoration of all the victories he did not bring us. The names of all the vice presidents during his tenure could be carved there, as well.

Ultimately, Richard Peddie makes an unsatisfying scapegoat, though. In interviews and on television, he seems like a decent guy who's excellent at his job. At worst, he may be an embodiment of the Canadian technocratic blandness that concentrates on efficiency and deprecates personal glory. This same blandness is why Canadian banks are the most dependable in the world, and why, while the rest of the West is falling apart, we more or less have maintained a working government and a secure middle class. Besides, it's too easy to blame Peddie. It's too easy to blame MLSE even. The tragedy of the Maple Leafs runs much deeper.

The problem with hockey in Toronto is the nostalgia that dominates how the game is played and consumed here. More than winning, Torontonians love the style of old-time hockey, a spirit of straightforwardness, brotherly violence, and what for lack of a better word I will call "not-fancyness." Hockey commentators here love nothing more than explaining how hockey games are won by cycling the puck, driving at the net, ugly goals. "They don't look pretty, but they win games." They love saying that.

Despite having more money than any other hockey team in the league, the Leafs have not purchased any brilliant players in an era overflowing with brilliant players. What the Leafs specialize in is the great bush-league heroes — this is not an accident nor is it the fault of the suits. They know what their audience wants and they give it to them. The city never took to Mats Sundin, the magnificent Swedish all-rounder. The fans adored local boy Tie Domi, a butcher on skates. His definitive moment, perhaps the definitive moment of the Leafs franchise in the 21st century, was his entirely gratuitous hit on Scott Niedermayer in the dying seconds of Game 4 of the 2001 Stanley Cup second round. At the end of a game in which Toronto tied the series, Domi's dirty hit handed the momentum over to the Devils, ruining the best chance the Leafs have had in living memory to make the Finals. The symmetry is nearly perfect: the size of the failure matches the depth of a moral disaster.

Toronto fans like extravagantly ordinary players. How else to explain paying \$3 million for Darcy Tucker? Or \$5.5 million for Bryan McCabe? Sometimes I wonder if Toronto would even know what to do with the Sedin twins, who are less like quick-fisted farm boys and more like magical changelings conceived by elves in the Scandinavian forest. Would they even be welcome in Toronto? During the 2011 Stanley Cup, everyone felt they had to cheer for Vancouver — Canada's team — but secretly everybody wanted Boston to take it. The choice between Ryan Kesler and Tim Thomas wasn't really a choice at all, even if Thomas is American. I recently overheard a conversation in a bar about whether Sidney Crosby would ever return to hockey, and one guy said, "I told you he was made of glass." That's typical; Toronto wouldn't take Sidney Crosby even if he were on offer. Not tough enough.

This bush-league spirit extends from hockey to all other sports. Chris Bosh, who was adored when he played here, was a great Toronto story exactly because he was so hard-working and not at all stuck up or sophisticated. He wasn't great, but he was doing the best with what he had. In 2007, when Toronto FC arrived in the city, many believed that it would break the cycle, but the city is full of English and Italians and Portuguese and Trinidadians and Koreans who are so football-crazy that TFC doesn't have to win. The situation with the Leafs has been replicated nearly perfectly, the process beginning in its very first season. TFC's "star" player then was Danny Dichio — one of the slowest football players in the league. (Watching him play made it seem like your TV was broken just in the spot where he was playing. It looked like he was running through treacle.) Eventually, in TFC's fifth game, he scored the team's first-ever goal, in the 24th minute, and thereafter TFC fans sang the Danny Dichio

song at minute 24. In the last game of that season, down 2-1 with nothing on the line, Dichio managed to catch a late ball and flick it over the keeper, which sent the Toronto fans into a hysterical frenzy. A midlevel player fluking the ball to achieve a meaningless draw — when you cheer such mediocrity, why should anybody give you anything better?

You may wonder: Why would anyone want to be a part of this? The answer is that there's little choice in the matter. My son first told me he was a Leafs fan when he was 3 years old. At first I was horrified; I wanted to shelter him, hoping it would all blow over. But lately I've realized that it's important for him to know this pain, so I bought him the Maple Leafs pajamas he thought he wanted. It's important for him to suffer with the city he lives in. Because suffering for a lack of beauty is right and proper. The bush-league spirit that infects Toronto's hockey also infects the rest of the city. We are a big, nasty, rich city that insists on acting like a small town. We're the size of Chicago, but how could you tell? Our mayor would be an amazing mayor for about 20,000 people. Our museums, our architecture, reflect little of the immense resources that flow through the city from half a continent. Our transit system is a joke because we refuse to plan for our success. It is obvious that Toronto won't be whole, won't begin to live properly again, until the Leafs win the Stanley Cup.

In the meantime, we deserve to lose. We deserve our pain. The pain is the only hope that we'll ever learn to win again.

FEEDBACK 1

The argument that the Toronto Maple Leafs don't want to win because they sell out stadiums is the stupidest cliché in sports. There is more to profit margins than revenue from television and ticket/concession sales. But let's let facts defend this instead, shall we?

1) The Leafs' front-office.

This is the most expensive staff of people running the show in the NHL. Brian Burke, Dave Nonis, Cliff Fletcher, and now Rick Dudley. All four of these guys could be full-time NHL GMs (well, maybe Fletch is getting a little senile). Add to that Claude Loiselle and Dave Poulin, and you've got arguably the most diverse and talented front-office in the League. But since MLSE doesn't want to win, they must be paying them boatloads of money just to be nice?

2) The "Mastercard Centre for Hockey Excellence"

Best training facility in the League, hands-down. You don't bother building this unless you want to attract the best players, and you don't want to attract the best players unless you want to win.

3) Player salaries

There is a salary cap in the NHL, and a floor. If the goal was to maximize profits while not caring about winning or losing, then why spend the maximum amount of money possible? As of this season Toronto has \$2.185M in cap space. This means they are paying \$13.815 million more than they have to.

4) Burying contracts in the AHL

Let's not forget that the team has no problem burying expensive contracts in the AHL (Jeff Finger - \$3.5M to play minor-league hockey), and using this extra supply of cash to get these terrible contracts from other teams along with their decent players. Jake Gardiner was acquired in a trade for Beauchemin because the Leafs had no problem with burying Lupul's inflated salary in the AHL had he not worked out (he did). Franson was acquired for NOTHING because Toronto had the ability to pay Lombardi \$3.2M not to play for the next 2 years had he not recovered from a concussion (looks like he will). There are more instances of this, but these are the 2 biggest that come to mind (the rest are just paltry \$1M expenses).

5) Playoff revenue

More playoff games, more money from the gate, concessions, television, and licensing fees. The amount of crap that people would buy if Toronto even made the finals would be astronomical.

Anyhow - I would like someone to explain to me how the Leafs don't care about winning again. I seem to be missing the point. They sure haven't been behaving like an indifferent organization over the last 4 years.

FEEDBACK 2

At first glance when you read the header, it sounds like he is saying Toronto is a horrible sports town, and when I hear that I hear we don't support our teams, or sports in general... We all know that is bullshit... Even though I am a diehard Leaf fan, I consider myself some what of a realist when it comes to the Leafs... but more on that in a minute... yeah this will be long. Sorry I haven't written in awhile, so deal with it.

Here's the thing, Toronto is actually a great sports town, maybe one of the best in North America, here are my reasons.

Aside from the success rate of the home teams, which really shouldn't even be a factor when it comes to fans, but whatever...

Toronto Indy - consistently 1 of the Top draws, and driver's favourite... which is why they brought it back

Roger's cup - tennis - another player favourite and one of the Top 3 draws, on the Tennis circuit... why do you think it always draws all the top players

Sorry I'm not a Golf fan, so I can't remember what it is called, but I know that when they do the Canadian Open and it is in Toronto, it is huge.

UFC - they were doing to bring it to Toronto, not just because they would draw, but because the fans are more educated on the sport, and know what it is, and not what it is rumoured to be

Unlike other cities in North America, we are not just a 1 sports town... favouritism aside, including myself as a Leaf fan, all the major sports are represented in Toronto... there are very few cities in North America that can say that... We have the NHL, NBA, MLB... the NFL sort of with the Bills playing here and rumoured to have even more games here... that doesn't happen unless the NFL the biggest league in the world thinks it's a great sports town.... hell LA doesn't even have a football team.

We have the CFL, doesn't matter if nobody cares, it is here.. we have professional Lacrosse, championship team I may add. We have professional soccer, again haven't won yet, but none of the other expansion teams have either.

How can you possibly say this is the worst sports town? okay, so are teams aren't doing well now... but I have always believed things go in cycles, and I think we are kinda like we were back in the late 80's early 90's... you know just before the Jays won back to back world series and the Leafs went to the semi-finals 2 years in a row, and one game away from the finals... oh yeah another thing about that idiots story that blows.

He made a comment about how Domi's hit in 2001 killed the only time in living memory the Leafs had a chance to win... Did he forget about the Doug Gilmour days? We were one game away then...

I know the Leafs are hurting, and I know that even though the team is better it will be hard to make the playoffs this year... but we are moving in the right direction. Were people happy when we got Burke, of course they were, but is that any different when LA was going crazy that Phil Jackson might go there, or any hot shot coach of the time going to some losing NFL team... it is human nature

As far as us going for non players or stars... everybody loves the underdog, that is human nature too. It doesn't mean we disrespect the guy with all the talent... we just cheer louder for the guy who may need some extra support... that's actually the Canadian way... Oh and the comment about us not wanting Crosby... last time I checked we sure as hell did, we also wanted Tavares... both of which are welcome anytime.

I am so sick of everyone hating on Toronto... all I know is that in one of the many careers in my life I spent it working for a cruise line, and I've been around the world 3 times, literally... and no matter where I was, if I wore my Toronto Maple Leafs t-shirt everyone knew I was Canadian, and they knew it was hockeytown... the same couldn't be said about my fellow Canadians from Montreal or Vancouver wearing their teams gear... not only did they not know what they were, they weren't even sure what country they were in... When people think Canada, the first city they think of is Toronto, you can deny that all you want, but that is from years of experience.

I haven't even touched on the bullshit he wrote about our museums, and actual city .. I'll leave that for another time... But I will leave you with this, if we are such a bad sports town, why do all the leagues want to come here? And if you don't think that's true, how many other cities are represented by so many sporting leagues?