

To watch, or not to watch



By Nate Smelle

Well, they did it! The Toronto Maple Leafs have won their first playoff series since 2004. With the exception of a few years in the late '80s when I was lulled into a trance by Lanny MacDonald's moustache and found myself cheering for the Calgary Flames, I have been a Leafs fan. Any fan of the sport understands the delusions of grandeur one must embrace to still be a Leafs fan in 2023. Seriously, how many times can one rationally defend a team that never seems to fail at letting their fans down? How many times can we say with a straight face, "This is our year!" To be a real Leafs' fan one must have more than just an ingrained and time-tested propensity for denial. A Leafs' fan must also possess an exceptional, and at times irrational sense of loyalty. I say irrational because supporting a team that the second most valuable team in the National Hockey League - valued at \$2-billion in 2022 - that has not even played in the Stanley Cup finals since Jim Pappin slid the puck by Montreal Canadiens' goalie Gump Worsley to bring the cup back to Toronto in 1967, is not what I would call a logical decision. Talking hockey with a friend recently who happens to be a lifelong Boston Bruins fan, he asked me what I thought of the "Buds" chances this year. "This is our year!" I joked, before reluctantly admitting that I believed the team's urge to hit the golf course was greater than their collective will to win the cup. I went on to tell him that I had given up on the Leafs a few years ago, and that I would be in the market for a new team if they didn't at least make it to the finals this year. Sure enough, that night the Leafs appeared to prove me right, losing 4-2 to the Tampa Bay Lightning in Game-5. Seeing the writing on the wall from decades of disappointment, I decided skip the inevitable let down by not watching Game-6. Sports fans and players are a uniquely superstitious bunch. From playoff beards to specific pre-game meals and rituals, there is no shortage of evidence backing this up. As a former player and current fan I have accumulated a number of my own superstitions over the years. For instance, while playing for the Bobcaygeon Bullets Jr. C team a hundred years or so ago, myself, a defenseman at the time, and our goalie would have a beer, a shot of whisky, and a banana in the dressing room before the game. Whenever we did not abide by this routine, we noticed that we both played terribly and usually lost the game. At first this ritual began as a joke, however once some of the other players on the team noticed the pattern of losing when we didn't perform the ceremony, we decided to engage in it more religiously. A couple years ago, after watching the Leafs get knocked out in the first round by the Habs, I started to recognize a pattern of my own. That being, whenever I watched an entire Leafs game, they lose. After watching the highlight reel from Game-6 last week, seeing the Leafs defeat the Lightning I realized that this pattern still holds true. Now, wanting to watch the Leafs quest for the cup unfold, I find myself face to face with my superstition; asking the question "to watch, or not to watch?" Logically, whether I watch the Leafs or not makes no difference on the outcome of the game. On the other hand, being a fan of learning from experience, there is a good argument for keeping the television off - at least for the second round.