

Bill Rea ?Babcock must deliver

Do you ever get the feeling that you're in the wrong business?

I have always really enjoyed what I do, even if I have always known it was never going to make me rich. I rely on the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation to do that for me. Hope still springs eternal.

I'm so content with my lot in life that I don't get too put out that a lot of people make more money than me. The size of the annual Sunshine List sometimes leaves me shaking my head, but is also a fact that the day this world starts making sense, there will be no further need for newspapers, and I'll be without an income.

With that in mind, I do start to wonder about some salaries that go through the proverbial roof.

I think of what professional athletes make. The really, really good ones, of course, make real bundles, on the order of umpteen millions every year. Even the mediocre journeymen make sums that I'm not likely to see in my bank account any time soon, at least not until OLG gets its act together. I actually feel a bit for these players. From my understanding, these pros devote their lives to learning their craft trying to get to the big leagues, and they are paid handsomely if (big if) and when they get there. On the way up, do they learn the basics of money management? If badly managed, a couple



of million dollars can disappear pretty quickly. I think we've all heard horror stories of athletes who were on top of their game who ended up in terrible financial straights, if not on the street or worse.

And now we hear about the new coach of the Toronto Maple Leafs, Mike Babcock, and the \$50 million he's going to be realizing over the next eight years (that's \$6.25 million per annum, for the benefit of those of you who don't have a calculator handy).

That sounds like big news. It was a major talking point in these parts last week. The subject was hashed about some in the Citizen office. The Toronto Sun devoted some 15 pages to the story, so it must be big news.

I guess I sound a little jealous, but I don't think I am. I could have eaten my Wheaties as a kid, and devoted the time to honing my hockey skills that I wasted reading comic books and watching TV, and maybe have put myself in line for such a deal. Yeah right. Reality tells me that would never have happened.

So good for Babcock. You certainly can't fault the guy for going for such a paycheque when it's offered to him, and there's a certain eloquence in being the best paid coach in league history.

But the hoopla about this signing makes me wonder.

He's being called the best coach in the game by some, and it is true he has a Stanley Cup championship to his credit (with Detroit Red Wings in 2008). In fact, he's got exactly the same number as Randy Carlyle (remember him?), although Babcock's is a bit more recent, and he's also got a world championship to his credit, as well as Olympic gold.

There are people who are saying this is just what the mighty Leafs need in order to return to prominence. I think there are some fans out there who would settle for respectability. Others would be willing to go along with making the playoffs, at least occasionally.

The problem with these bold prognostications is we've heard them many times before. Did not people think bringing a proven winner like Carlyle in the camp was just the thing that was needed?

We've been hearing that things were about to turn the corner for years.

Those of you like me, who are old enough to remember, should think back to the late 1970s and early '80s.

The Leafs made it to the playoffs in 1978 without too much trouble, and got by the first round to face the heavily-favoured Islanders. The series went seven games, with the Buds taking the series in overtime, putting them in the final four.

They faced Montreal in the next round, and the miracles ended then and there, as the Habs prevailed in four straight.

I remember lots of talk at the time of the Leafs having finally turned the corner, and how things could only get better from there. That was not to be the case. Those of you who were around in those days might recall the Leafs sort of stalled the following season, compiling an acceptable, but disappointing record. Things got so bad that Harold Ballard fired coach Roger Neilson, then hired him back a couple of days later. Things didn't improve much over the rest of the season.

But hope was back the following year, after Neilson was gone, because Punch Imlach was brought back as general manager. I remember lots of predictions that this was just what was needed to push the Leafs ahead to prominence. Imlach applied his methods, which were some years out of date, and the team went back to the sewer.

So much for the success that he was supposed to bring.

So forgive me if I seem a little cynical when it comes to all these high hopes being expressed for Babcock. You see, like so many of you, I've heard such things before, and they don't seem to amount to much.

But it is also true that good things do happen sometimes, which means I'm willing to wait to see events unfold. I won't be expecting miracles, and that seems in step with the warnings that Babcock himself has been issuing. I guess that means we're not going to see big celebrations for at least a couple of years. That should make sense to the realists out there. Add to it all that he's been signed to an eight-year contract. That tells me Leaf management agrees this is going to take a while, and are prepared to wait for the results to develop.

But there is another reality, that says Babcock had better deliver at some point, with some sign of progress being shown pretty soon. Missing the playoffs again next year might be forgivable ? Leaf fans are kind of used to that, I think. But they'll want to see improvement before too long.

Besides, if management is laying out \$50 million, they are going to expect some return on their investment, and rightly so. In addition to the money, the management folks behind this deal have a lot on the line. If the Leafs win all the marbles in the next eight years, they will be entitled to take a lot of bows for accomplishing something that hadn't been done in half a century. And if Babcock doesn't deliver, they are going to look like dopes, not to mention financially irresponsible.

One positive result of this story is it's attracted a lot of attention, and the number of headlines the issue got was impressive, considering we're in the middle of a playoff tournament to which the Leafs weren't even invited.

It almost makes one forget about the Blue Jays.