

Bill Rea ? How much longer?

?When what you're doing doesn't work for 50 years, it's time to try something new.?

Barack Obama

I was watching Obama's State of the Union Address last week with my wife, and this particular line jumped out at me.

He was talking about America's long-standing feud with Cuba, but I could think of other possible applications.

?Is he talking about the Leafs?? I asked, admittedly a little tongue in cheek.

Okay, I admit I was being flippant, but considering the recent doings around Leaf Nation, I think a lot of people in this area of the world have a right to be that, if not thoroughly aggravated.

I thought Obama was fairly close to the mark when it came to his reference to 50 years. This coming May 2, it will mark 48 years since the Leafs won the Stanley Cup. I was allowed to stay up for that game. A bit of googling once had me find a replay of the last minute of the game, including the insurance goal by George Armstrong, and the subsequent cup presentation.

I get angry that kids today have not had that thrill in Toronto. Okay, your team is not going to win every year. The fortunes of sports teams run in cycles, which mean clubs end up spending time among the dregs of the league. But during such times, the good franchises assess the situation, look at what they've got, acquire the necessary talent and gradually work their way back to respectability.

Since most of you will be too young to do this, I will cast my mind back for you, to the late '60s and early '70s.

After the Leafs took all the marbles in '67, things kind of fell apart on them. I guess the expansion of the NHL had a lot to do with it, as did the fact the team that won the cup had a lot of skillful, yet aging players ? it's sad to turn 30, isn't it.

I was still a school kid at the time, so it wasn't easy to accept that's the way life goes. But there were other things to hold one's interest. It is also a fact that as I progressed through high school (mid-'60s), there were increasingly frequent signs of hope. The Leafs went from missing the playoffs to early exits from the post season to suddenly being a force in the league.

But then things seemed to tank. So Harold Ballard brought back Punch Imlach, and things really went into the tank. The Leafs went from being a heady team playing competitive hockey to a bunch of disgruntled guys playing for what amounted to a bloody disgrace.

From then, it's seemed to be up and down, with the team showing the fans a glimmer of hope every couple of years, but spending most of their time hanging around nowhere. It seems like fans jump up and cheer if the Leafs make the playoffs.

In my first column of 2014, I offered some sage predictions for the coming year, and one of them was that the Leafs would make the playoffs last year.

One of the ladies in the office read that, and rather bluntly expressed her doubts of my conclusion.

?Bill,? she asked, ?were you drunk when you wrote this??

In fact, I wasn't.

But I am concerned that one of these days, the loyal Leaf fans are going to collectively say ?enough!?

I know that a lot of you will say it will never happen, and there's considerable evidence to back that up.

A franchise that's done very little of note for the last several decades can still fill the seats for their games, charging prices that few of us can afford.

There was a guy quoted in last Wednesday's Toronto Sun, commenting it cost him \$1,000 to go to a game.

It's been many years since I attended a Leaf game. If memory serves, it was almost 40 years ago that a friend from high school landed tickets to see the Leafs beat Boston. I'm not likely to attend a game in the near future. For one thing, I can't afford it. For another, unless I can score free tickets, or something like that, I'm not going to waste my time. If need be, I can watch the game at home, where the snacks and beer are a lot cheaper, and I can turn to something else if I get turned off by what I'm watching. Both Beth and I are pretty good at channel-hopping.

I know I am not alone in this negative attitude I've developed toward the Buds.

Last week's news was filled with accounts of disgruntled fans throwing Leaf jerseys on the ice, showing their frustration with the team's performance. It's now reached that stage that these people are being escorted from the arena, handed fines and told not to come back.

When I first heard of those accounts, I was a little annoyed, thinking it was a case of overreacting. But it is also true there are very clear rules governing such activity. You aren't supposed to toss anything on the ice during a hockey game because someone could get badly hurt.

I recall a time when I was very young and my parents somehow got tickets to the game. During one of the intermissions, by father

bought me a box of Cracker Jacks, and I was a little put out that there was no prize in there. Just a note saying the prizes had been left out of the boxes at the request of Maple Leaf Gardens, because of fears they could end up on the ice and cause injury.

It might seem like throwing a sweater on the ice might not be in the same league (one would hope that a professional hockey player was savvy enough to see something like that, and refs enough on the ball to blow the whistles). But in a situation like that, no one should be throwing anything on the ice.

Even renowned hockey know-it-all Don Cherry has jumped in, calling the people who threw the jerseys "jerks." It was not the potential injuries that upset him. He said he doesn't like to see a club kicked when it's down.

In a sense, I guess I'm guilty of that here.

While I don't approve of what these folks did, I think there's another issue that really should be addressed by those responsible, namely Maple Leaf management.

People who have probably idolized the Leafs all their lives have laid out lots of good money to buy these jerseys, and then throw them on the ice in frustration. Should not management be sitting up and taking notice? Kicking these people out and fining them is not the answer. Fixing the product on the ice is.

It's been almost half a century since the team carried off the Cup. How much longer must the wait last

