

Bill Rea ? They don't clear the benches much anymore



I freely admit I am not the hockey fan I once was.

As proof of that, I cite the fact that I started writing this column last Thursday night at the kitchen table of my home. Meanwhile, my wife was downstairs watching the only TV in the house, as the Leafs played the Philadelphia Flyers.

There was a time when I wouldn't have missed a game, and was ready to do almost anything to make sure I got to see it, if it was on the tube.

There were many Saturday dinners as a kid during which I was told I would be sent to bed before the hockey game if I didn't eat all of my vegetables. I ate them, grudgingly to be sure. Like so many of you, my favourite vegetable is roast beef.

I was allowed to stay up late enough to watch the Leafs carry off three Stanley Cups before I graduated from primary to junior grades at school, so pulling for a team that has constantly come up short for 50 years can drain one's enthusiasm.

There have been a number of changes in the game since I was a kid, and I stumbled upon such an example not long ago while fooling around on the internet.

When was the last time any of you ever saw a bench-clearing brawl in a hockey game? Weren't they entertaining to watch?

Before this goes any further, I'll state that I hate to see fights in hockey games. On the other hand, I accept that such antics earned the Flyers a couple of Stanley Cups in the 1970s. I do understand something of the male ego, and that thing known as testosterone.

There is such a thing as aggression, and players who are aggressive have a better chance of making the team. More to the point, if all the players on Team A hop over the boards and start throwing punches, the complement of Team B had better get their butts into the battle pronto, backing up their mates.

It wasn't always the case with me and fights on the ice. There was a time they added some spice to Hockey Night in Canada. I wasn't alone with such beliefs.

For a time when I was little, the only TV in the house was in the basement. I'd be watching the game while my father was upstairs doing something. My dad was something of a stickler when it came to running on stairs, going either up or down. But if I yelled up to him that there was a fight on the ice, he would literally run downstairs to catch as much of the action as he could.

And if the benches were emptied, it meant the entertainment would last a lot longer, as the officials were ending one battle while a couple of others broke out. What fun!

But you don't see the benches empty much any more, and I guess that's mainly because the penalties are so stiff.

The memories of these events were driven home to me recently when I stumbled upon a bench-clearing brawl on YouTube.

It was from Dec. 7, 1963, a Saturday night when the Leafs were hosting Chicago.

The battle started when Reg Fleming speared Eddie Shack. Fleming was excused to the penalty box while the Leafs grouped around Shack, who was still down on one knee. Then Bob Baun skated over to the penalty box to confront Fleming. Carl Brewer and George Armstrong were pretty quick to get over there too. Shack was back on his feet by this point and, according to Bill Hewitt, was glaring at Fleming. The referee then announced that Fleming was out of the game. He mouthed off a bit to the ref, then headed to the bench. On the way, he bumped into Larry Hillman, and the two of them went at it. The linesmen did a good job of keeping the two apart, but Baun was able to get up to Fleming and the two of them started trading punches. Other skirmishes were taking place, and Hewitt announced all the players were on the ice.

The action continued, and eventually there was a plain-clothed guy with a camera on the ice. What's a bench-clearing brawl without

the media there to record it?

Meanwhile, the two goalies, Glenn Hall and Don Simmons, seemed to be chatting amiably off to the side.

Of course it was announced that the players who left the benches to take part in the fighting would face consequences, namely a fine of \$25. How times have changed! When was the last time you bought a two-four for 25 bucks?

The video showed several cases in which third players involved themselves in individual fights. It was a couple of years before such action would mean an automatic game misconduct. Murray Balfour backed Brewer right into the Leaf bench, and then started throwing punches. A whole lot of other players were there in seconds.

Interestingly, only three players, Fleming, Baun and Balfour, were tossed from the game. Stan Mikita drew five minutes for fighting and a 10-minute misconduct. This is a guy who would eventually twice win the Lady Byng Trophy.

Things sure have changed.