

Bill Rea ? Ticket prices no big deal

One news item last week that didn't get nearly the play I was expecting was that the price of tickets to take in a Toronto Maple Leaf Game is going to be increasing.

That means if you want seats in the lower bowl at the Air Canada Centre, you're going to be parting with \$270, and that's for one ticket. If you're planning on taking a date, that means . . . er . . . do the arithmetic. My wife and I could blow one-third of our annual entertainment budget in one night by going to the game, and only have places to park our individual carcasses to show for it. No food or drink has been yet consumed.

Now it seems you can also score tickets in the upper bowl for a little less than \$100 a head, but that's still a chunk of change. And what if you want to take your kids to the game?

This all boils down to something that very few of us can afford, although it might be nice to dream about.

While I might give my head a shake at the thought of ticket prices going up, it's not something I'm complaining about. I was brought up essentially to be a capitalist, meaning I understand the concept of letting the market decide certain things, like prices.

It is a fact that tickets to Leaf games have been a hot ticket for more than 60 years. Getting into the games has always been an expensive proposition, yet few are the empty seats one has ever seen at ACC, or Maple Leaf Gardens prior to that. Despite the prices, they are still able to fill the stands. That means the market can handle higher prices.

I have been to a few Leaf games over the 60 years I have been alive, but not many. In most of the cases, a friend of a friend had surplus tickets, and I got into the Carlton Street Cashbox (although I have been inside ACC a couple of times, I have yet take in a Leaf game there).

There were two years when I was a little kid when my father was able to score tickets to Saturday night games in early and mid-February, just happening to coincide with the birthdays of my brother and myself. But he was only able to get two tickets per game. No matter, I got to two of them, and got to see the great Gordie Howe in action. Very few complaints from this corner.

I got to the odd game in the years that followed, often as a result of tickets suddenly appearing seemingly from nowhere. There were lots of memorable experiences. True, the Leafs lost the first game I attended, 6-3 to Chicago, but if memory serves, that was the last time I had to personally watch my heroes suffer loss. There were a couple other intros to the adult world for an impressionable kid, There was one game in the late '60s that my parents and brother attended. The Leafs beat the hell out of the Minnesota North Stars.

The real entertainment was from a guy seated in the end Blues who brought his bagpipes. He was part of a very rowdy gang sitting in that section, and they were clearing having a blast. I remember my mother trying to explain some of the nuances of adult behaviour to her offspring. It was a couple of years before I appreciated that most of these guys would have had flasks in their jacket pockets. It was also a couple of years before I felt sympathy for what those poor guys probably had to go through the next morning.

I was in high school the last time I attended a Leaf game. It was Nov. 27, 1976. I remember the date well because it was the day before the Grey Cup game, which was played in Toronto that year. Ottawa beat Saskatchewan in the big game.

I had been lucky to have parents with season's tickets for the Toronto Argonauts, which they sometimes couldn't use, so a friend of mine from school (his name was Rob) would join me for the odd match. In time, Rob came into tickets for a Leaf game. I didn't bother asking how. One of the nice things I learned about being a teen is parents will sometimes finance much of the social life. I didn't mind a bit.

The timing of the last Leaf game I took in left a lot to be desired. I spent most of that day in bed, battling the flu. But the fact was getting tickets was a rare event, so there was no way I was going to let a simple biological malfunction get in the way.

And since it was Grey Cup weekend, there were lots of football fans taking in the local hockey action that Saturday evening. Rob and I had a couple of very loud louts, probably from Regina, sitting right behind us. They had a good time. We all watched the Leafs beat Boston 4-2.

That was more than 40 years ago. The reason I haven't attended a game since is I couldn't afford it, and I still can't. But there are a lot of people out there who can, which is why the seats are always filled.

And it is also a fact that the Leafs, along with the other clubs, need to make money. Auston Matthews and his mates don't just give their services away. They charge a lot for what they do (largely because they can charge a lot) so the Maple Leaf organization has to come up with the money to pay them. That's where the fans come in.

It bothers me a little. Part of me is of the opinion that every kid living in this part of the world who is also a Leaf fan should be able to get to see their heroes play the odd time, or at least once. But is it also not the case that the very rarity is what makes it all so valuable?

