

Bill Rea ? Was Keon the greatest Leaf?

For the record, it was 24 years ago yesterday (Wednesday) that my father died.

I naturally think of him often, but over the weekend, I experienced a strong wish that I could have had him in front of me so he and I could talk.

I would have loved to have heard his reactions to the unveiling of the top 100 Toronto Maple Leafs of all time.

I can see lots of spirited conversations being sparked up in homes and offices all over the place that were prompted by the release of that list late last week.

I have a few problems with the list. Chief among them is a lack of detail on how it was compiled. Saturday's Toronto Star credited it to ?a 30-member panel.? And that is the most definite statement I saw.

The top 10 on the list are as follows, in order: Dave Keon, Syl Apps, Ted Kennedy, Darryl Sittler, Mats Sundin, Tim Horton, Johnny Bower, Borje Salming, Frank Mahovlich and Turk Broda.

I never saw Apps, Kennedy or Broda play, but I have read enough about them, with that supplemented what my dad told me. I guess it should not come as much of a surprise that my old man's recollections might have been a little flawed. For example, he once told me, when I was a kid, that he seemed to remember that Broda, a goalie, had once scored a goal. I believed that for many years, but I have never been able to find any verification of that.

Facts are facts. Based on what I personally saw, read or was told about, I agree the 10 men who head the list of top 100 Leafs were very splendid hockey players. But when one tries to rank individuals, one leaves tons of room for debate.

Oh, what fun!

Was Keon the best player in Leaf history? There is absolutely no doubt he was a superb player. But does he really rank that high? Room for debate.

I remember watching him play from the time I needed my dad to tighten my skates for me.

It is true that Keon is the only Leaf who ever won the Conn Smythe Trophy, which is awarded to the player judged most valuable to his team during the playoffs. This happened in 1967, the last time the Leafs won the Stanley Cup. But I have read compelling arguments that the trophy should have gone to Jim Pappin.

Pappin, for the benefit of those people whose memories might not stretch back almost 50 years, led the league in scoring during the playoffs that year. Everyone (at least everyone like me who was around to watch the final game) remembers the memorable insurance goal, scored with 47 seconds left in regulation time in the sixth game of that memorable series which, incidentally, Montreal was expected to win. It was scored by Captain George Armstrong. It gave the Leafs a 3-1 lead, and minutes later, Armstrong was hoisting the hardware. What most of the world might not remember (and I confess I had forgotten it until I read about it many years later) is it was Pappin who scored the winning goal in that game. That's a great trivia question to throw at any person who considers him-or-herself a Leaf fan.

Armstrong placed 12th on the list of the top 100. Pappin was 89th.

Granted, I have referenced but a couple of days in the illustrious careers of these three men.

Apps placed second on the list. As I stated above, I never saw him play, but my father did, and he remembered both the player and what he represented.

His son, Syl Jr. had a successful career with a couple of NHL teams, including the Pittsburgh Penguins.

I remember watching one game on TV, played at that former shrine known as Maple Leaf Gardens, in which the Penguins had bested the Leafs. The younger Apps had played a significant role in that victory. He rightly earned the right to be named one of the Three Stars. He skated onto the ice at the end of the match to accept the accolade, to a chorus of ?boos.?

My father had watched the game with me.

?Y'know, I didn't think I'd live to see the day that the name Syl Apps would be booed in Maple Leaf Gardens,? he said.

Kennedy's playing days were long before I came along, but I have read and heard stories of his grit and courage.

Will anyone ever match Sittler's performance Feb. 7, 1976, when he notched 10 points against the Bruins? I remember the date because to was the day after my 18th birthday, and my brother took me out for an evening of entertainment to celebrate, getting me home just in time for the Three Stars.

Sittler also stood out in his community in those days. I well remember the day in 1980 when I stood on a sidewalk on University Avenue in Toronto watching Terry Fox run by, followed by several local illuminates, Sittler among them.

Horton was sixth on the list. I hate the thought that I might appear to be denigrating the man. He was a great hockey player, but does he really deserve to be ranked that high?

When we were little kids, Horton was my brother's favourite player. Mine was Red Kelly (he was 14th on the list). Could sibling rivalry be rearing its ugly head?

Bower ranked seventh. There was a time I was the youngest kid on the cul-de-sac on which we lived, meaning I was relegated to the role of goalie in street hockey games. I both enjoyed it and was good at it. I was compared to the great Bower.

I've met him. A wonderful man! He richly deserves to be in the top 10.

Salming was a great defenceman. I marvelled at the way he threw himself in front of slap shots.

And certainly the Big M must be ranked high among the Leaf alumni.

I have heard stories of the great Charlie Conacher. He was 11th on the list. Did he deserve to be higher? And if he did, how high do we put him?

I think back to the glory days of the Leafs in the '60s, when they won their fair share of Stanley Cups.

Allan Stanley was a big part of the defensive squad in those days. I played defence in house league in those days, so Stanley was one of the guys I followed and idolized. I'm very glad he made it to the top 100, but did he deserve to be in the 23rd spot, especially since Ron Ellis was in 24th? And if we're going to set that kind of standard, then Bob Pulford certainly deserved to be ranked higher than 26th. Better than Stanley? yes. Better than Ellis? debatable.

In fact, this whole list is debatable, and that should be surprising to no one.

If I were put on the spot to name the best Leaf of all time, it would be a toss-up between Sittler and Bower. But those are my opinions, based on what I have seen.

I am frustrated there are spirited arguments going on all over the country, and I'm missing them.

What would have my father have said?

