

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Nothing stifles Leaf fans? hope

When I was a young kid growing up in a small eastern Ontario town ? on the St. Lawrence River, about half way between Toronto and Montreal ? I was an ardent fan of the Toronto Maple Leafs.

My favorite player was Leaf goalie Turk Broda. Indeed, I started hockey as a goalie because of him ? and remember, this was well before goalies wore masks ? but when we got old enough for kids to start raising the puck it occurred to me that I should be out there raising the puck at some other poor sap rather than dodging the pucks myself, so I moved out to defence.

My older brother, alas, cheered for the hated Montreal Canadiens. He still does. (Actually, he started out cheering for the Rangers, but when our aunt bought us hockey sweaters one Christmas she got him a Montreal sweater because she liked the pattern better.)

All this came to mind on the weekend while viewing pictures in the Sunday Star of the bronze sculptors of Ted Kennedy, Johnny Bower and Darryl Sittler ? the first three honorees of what will be called Legends Row, a terrific idea and fitting tribute to these former great players.

Now all those Leaf fans out there born after 1967 ? which is undoubtedly the biggest chunk of them ? may be wondering how a hapless outfit like their beloved Leafs has the chutzpah to call anything associated with its history Legends Row.

In addition to being Canada's centennial year, of course, 1967 was the last time Leafs won the Stanley Cup. They haven't even reached the Cup finals since then, let alone win anything. It's also beginning to look like it might take until the year 2067, Canada's 200th anniversary, before they win another one.

But none of this extraordinary record of futility seems to dampen the enthusiasm on the adoring legions of fans who call themselves Leafs Nation. With the possible exception of Chicago Cubs fans ? whose team hasn't won the World Series since 1908 ? Leaf loyalists must be among the world's most devoted believers. Face it, the majority of Leaf fans ? and all Cubs fans ? have never, ever seen their teams win, yet they continue to hope.

Each year, almost without fail, the Leafs seem to be well on their way ? finally ? to a successful season. But that's in August, before the first puck is dropped in anger.

Many of those years they have apparently been well placed to take a serious run at the Cup but, alas, fate (or, more likely poor play) seems to intervene. Just last year, for example, at the Olympic break, they were well up the list of playoff contenders, only to become the one team among the 16 in that position not to make the playoffs.

All of which brings me back to where I began, as a kid cheering for a team that was traditionally among the best in the six-team league.

It may shock current Leaf fans to know that when the Leafs defeated Montreal in 1948 they became the all-time winningest NHL team. It took Montreal 10 years to regain that place.

Now, of course, the Stanley Cup count is Montreal, 24, Leafs, 13.

Even without having won the Cup since 1967, the Leafs are still second overall, which shows you how good they used to be in the early years.

It brings to mind the brilliant scene in the movie Atlantic City, when the Burt Lancaster character ? an old gambler who thought everything used to be better years before ? was giving a new kid from Saskatchewan his first look at the Atlantic Ocean. As they strolled along that city's famous boardwalk, the new kid in town was clearly awestruck by the size and grandeur of the ocean, but Lancaster turned to him and said, ?You should have seen it back then. It was really something.?

It occurs to me now that perhaps the ever-shrinking cohort of Leaf fans old enough to remember the Leafs ?back then? may have an even tougher time than the newbies dreaming of the day we'll all be standing on Bay street downtown watching the Stanley Cup parade float by.

It's one thing to give your heart to a never-was ? taking some comfort in the low expectations that entails ? but quite another to think back on the used-to-be and realize you'll likely never experience that again.

None of which, of course, completely stifles the everlasting hope. There simply is no reasonable explanation for that.

