

Robert's Rant: Are you seeing what I'm seeing?

By **Robert Belardi**

Opinion

Up and down might not even be the way to say it. There might be another way of putting it that would be more pertinent. Unacceptable perhaps? That's the one that has been used.

Ever since the Toronto Maple Leafs opened up their 2022/2023 season there have been 'unacceptable' performances.

Opening night's 5-2 defeat against the Montreal Canadiens was the very first time Sheldon Keefe murmured the word 'unacceptable' and it only took 60 minutes of hockey for him to throw that out there.

In the 4-2 defeat on home ice against the Arizona Coyotes on October 17, the Leafs faithful booed their home team off of the ice after failing to score in the opening two frames. Now isn't that unacceptable, shall we say? It was only the fourth game of the year and this was already happening.

Keefe later came out in the post-match press conference to criticize his star players and how they didn't show up. Then, following two consecutive victories against the Dallas Stars and the Winnipeg Jets, the Leafs went into Las Vegas Monday night and looked awful. Sloppy. Careless with possession of the puck. They had a few chances but the team never got a hold of the game and ended up falling 3-1.

So here we are back to square one. Mitch Marner said after the game this loss was 'unacceptable.' If every two or three games this is the topic of conversation then this is going to be a long year for The Buds.

In truth, I rant here today to share why I believe this is the most important season since Brendan Shanahan came into the picture. This season is also the most pressure the players have ever faced since donning the blue and white.

It's been the same story for seven years now. Win. Make the playoffs. Bow out in the first round. Win. Make the playoffs. Bow out in the first round. A vicious cycle in fact and one that eats away at you mentally.

Do you believe in this team? A lot of Leafs fans that I have spoken to do not. Some of my friends believe if the team can't get by the first round, head coach Keefe, Kyle Dubas and Shanahan are all gone. A few other friends I speak with also believe Auston Matthews will walk away from his contract which expires at the end of next season.

There's no more playing around. For Toronto, if nothing is done this year in the postseason and if the team quite frankly doesn't at least make the conference finals in my opinion, the club faces a serious problem.

This season will be the toughest task yet. How do you win over a fan base that hasn't been satisfied since 1967? You were doing it in 2017 when the Maple Leafs lost to the Washington Capitals in the first round. Everyone was happy and thought 'finally we have a team.'

But now that team is hanging by a thread. Fans are clearly frustrated and they're not going to give this group the benefit of the doubt anymore. As a matter of fact, it doesn't seem the management would do the same. We'll see if there will more 'unacceptable moments' moving forward. It's win or nothing at this point. And I guarantee you with some streaky performances lately, the players are most certainly feeling it too.