

Robert's Rant: Tonight is the night we've all been waiting for

By Robert Belardi

OPINION

It came down to overtime in game four of the 1979 quarterfinals between the Montreal Canadiens and the Toronto Maple Leafs. Boos came down from the stands in Maple Leaf Gardens as the Buds were forced to kill off a penalty.

Down 3-0 in the series against the eventual Stanley Cup champions, the Habs moved into the zone on the power play. Jacques Lemaire, Yvon Lambert, Guy LaFleur, Larry Robinson and Guy Lapointe were on the ice.

Lapointe came into the zone. Boos still echoing down to the ice. Lapointe shuffled the puck over to Robinson and from the point, the defenceman ripped a slap shot past Leafs netminder Paul Harrison. The Habs swept the Leafs. That folks, was the last time the Habs and Leafs played each other in the playoffs.

The Habs dominated that season with a 52-17-11 record while the Leafs walked away 34-33-13.

Now, heading into Game One tonight, the tables have turned.

Forty-two years later, hockey fans in Ontario, Quebec and around the world witness a turn of events. In this year's unique North Division, the Toronto Maple Leafs (35-14-7) will take on the Montreal Canadiens (24-21-11) and oh how different these records look now.

In history, the two teams have met each other 15 times in the playoffs and the Habs lead the all-time showdown 8-7. The two have also met each other in the finals five times and the Leafs lead that by a record of 3-2.

Tonight, May 20, every son, daughter, grandchild, husband, wife and grandparent who lives and breathes hockey have been dreaming for the day to come. Tonight is the night. This is it. Finally, something to look forward to, in a time where there truly isn't much to be excited about.

The Toronto Maple Leafs enter this playoff series having won their last playoff series in 2004.

The club has been faced with heavy criticism in recent years since losing their first-round matchups to Washington, Boston and Columbus respectively.

The Habs on the other hand have made it to two, Eastern Conference finals in the last decade and with Marc Bergevin and Kyle Dubas pulling a few strings, every indication would suggest both teams are in win now mode.

If I gave you easy questions to answer, they would simply be these. Who has the edge? Who has more pressure on their hands? Who is favoured? That answer is the Toronto Maple Leafs.

When I ask you the following questions, maybe there truly isn't a direct answer. Will Leafs netminder Jack Campbell continue his supremacy over Montreal? Will Carey Price be at full strength? Which team is hungrier? These have yet to be determined. But for now, I'll leave those responses to you.

Seeing the rest of the playoff matchups on television, I wish fans were allowed to enter the building here in Canada. It's quite frustrating and I can write you a haranguing statement about this, with a little respect of course.

But, just as the Euro rolls around and many fans in the area grab their country's flag, it's time we grab flags of our own. Rally and renew the rivalry that has simply gone stale for over forty years. Relive the passion from fan to fan. And at the same time, unite together as hockey supporters. Because now is the time and it is fuelled with more excitement than ever before.

Maybe one more question. A personal one. Who do you got?

Game One is tonight at 7:30 p.m. at Scotiabank Arena in arguably the most highly anticipated playoff series this year.