

The Rites of Spring and its Seasonal Sports

By Jim Stewart

The Rites of Spring are all around us in the festivals of rebirth being observed by tens of millions across Canada.

This past weekend, the solemnity of Good Friday dissolved into the celebration of Easter. The croci, daffodils, and tulips emerge from the cold earth providing the promise of vibrant color against the rainy skies of April. We experience the good feeling of opened windows, letting the fresh Spring air into our homes. Gatherings around the Easter table with friends and family rouse the spirit--long subdued by the muck and slush of what seemed like five Novembers in a row for folks in Central Ontario.

The sports world synchronizes quite nicely with these moments of rebirth as we transition from March to April.

Paramount among these sporting events is Major League Baseball's Opening Day.

Local fans reveled in the Blue Jays' stirring 8-2 win over Tampa Bay in a venue that has not been kind to the SkyDome Nine. For 24 hours, fans' insecurities about Bo and Vladdy's as core players, the left-handed power issues, and pitching injuries are laid to rest by the events of Game 1: Bichette's 2-RBI double and his sterling play at shortstop; Vladdy's 450-foot bomb to deep centre and his highlight reel catches at first base; Biggio's home run and Keirmaier's RBI from the left side of the dish; and Berrios's six-innings of work exorcise the demons connected to his premature exit from last Fall's crucial playoff game due to the Jays' metrics-based over-managing.

Not only did MLB fans fall in love again with the most charming of North American sports, but running simultaneously with the pastoral pastime is March Madness.

Of particular interest for Canadian basketball fans is the Sweet Sixteen matchup featuring two of our finest homegrown collegiate basketball players in a Good Friday showdown: Gonzaga Bulldogs' Point Guard Ryan Nembhard of Aurora versus the Purdue Boilermakers' Centre and NCAA Player of the Year Zach Edey of Toronto.

It is perfect prime time entertainment after a Friday afternoon of observances.

Edey's #1-ranked Boilermakers advance to the Elite Eight with an 80-68 victory over Nembhard's Bulldogs. Edey scores 27 points and collects 14 rebounds while Nembhard fires 14 points and dishes out 7 assists in a showcase of Canadian hardcourt talent.

Aligning quite nicely with Opening Day and March Madness is the Masters Golf Championship?an event perfectly-constructed for television. The race for the Green Jacket is always compelling.

CBS commentators present Augusta National as an Edenic place. Even the calls of local song birds are used to cheer on the birdies and eagles made by the best golfers in the world. Amid the pine straw, white sand, azaleas, and rolling emerald green surfaces is Amen Corner. It's a prayerful place, indeed.

In addition to the regenerative feelings created by Opening Day, March Madness, and The Masters is the excitement generated by the final playoff pushes in the NBA and NHL.

While the ?tanking? Raptors are more than likely to lose their final fifteen games of their star-crossed season, Canadian basketball fans can take solace in the adventures of twenty-five Canadian-born players currently employed by NBA teams. It's a star-studded cast of characters including MVP-candidate Gilgous-Alexander, NBA champion Murray, Brooks, Dort, Powell, Alexander-Walker, Joseph, Olynyk, and Barrett?all of whom are committed not only to their professional squads, but to Team Canada this Summer in the Paris Olympics.

Alas, the regenerative Rites of Spring won't likely apply to long-suffering Leafs fans whose team this Winter has been up and down like a toilet seat. Perhaps these loyal folks will be rewarded for their steadfast faith in a team that has excoriated them in shocking and agonizing ways since 1967. Sadly, there's much more Good Friday than Easter Sunday in the experiences of Leafs fans since their last trip to the Stanley Cup finals 57 years ago.

A stunning contrast to the agony of the Leafs is the comparative success of the Toronto Rock, a lacrosse juggernaut hurtling toward the playoffs with a stellar 12-3 record.

The six-time champions find themselves perched atop the fifteen-team NLL. The Rock have assembled a championship-calibre team that is worthy of attention when they appear on TSN.

This squad of superior athletes is by far the most successful professional sports franchise in Toronto over the last quarter-century with titles won in 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2005, and 2011.

Our nation's official summer sport is played by a terrific team competing just down the QEW in Hamilton and the Rock offers the prospect of playoff success this Spring.

In addition to the hope that springs eternal in the local professional teams, there are the high school teams that are moving full speed into their Spring seasons.

April, May, and June are busy months for our highly-skilled secondary school high athletes who compete in a cornucopia of sports including Baseball, Rugby, Slo-Pitch, Track and Field, Ultimate Frisbee, Lacrosse, Badminton, Flag Football, and Co-Ed Volleyball. Local residents can enjoy the spirited tournaments and meets running outdoors as our high school student-athletes break out of their winter confines to enjoy the fields, tracks, and pitches in quest of Regional Championships.

Our local rep teams are also preparing for a season of Elite competition after months of indoor training and will be vying for provincial league championships in baseball, softball, rugby, soccer, lacrosse, and track and field with an eye to USports and NCAA scholarships as post-secondary goals.

Spring has sprung and with it the promise of entertainment for sports fans at so many levels of competition. Enjoy the sunny skies and the evenings of amazing television sports that will be beaming into living rooms and sports bars across the region for the next few weeks.

I will be enjoying a Rite of Spring next week when I fly with seven other crazy Canucks to Phoenix to enjoy the warm air of Arizona, the beauty of the cacti, and hospitality at the Rancho Manana, Coyote Lakes, and Palmbrook golf clubs. My travelogue about this ?Adventure in Arizona? (subtitled ?Cursing Amid the Cacti') will appear in this newspaper in the coming weeks as a preview to the Central Ontario golf season.

Until then, enjoy the Rites of Spring all around us.