

Yet another disappointment

by MIKE BAKER

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

A horrible cliché, I know. But it's one that, in this uber-strange COVID-19 world, where practically everything we know and love has been flipped upside down, seems to perfectly sum up our beleaguered Toronto Maple Leafs.

Despite being heralded by Las Vegas bookmakers last summer as one of the favourites to lift this year's Stanley Cup, the Leafs stumbled before they even reached the first hurdle this time around ? losing out to the Columbus Blue Jackets in five games in the NHL's playoff play-in qualifier. The feelings across Leafs Nation following Sunday's meagre elimination, after a 3-0 defeat on home ice, were familiar.

Disappointment. Frustration. Heartbreak. Again. There's no question that something needs to change this off-season, but how far does Leafs management go? This is a cap-strapped team, and, while they possess one of the most talented attacking quartets in the entire league, there are glaring deficiencies across their line-up. Deficiencies that were all too easily exposed by a disciplined, hard-working Blue Jackets team last week.

The Leafs have long had problems on the blueline. Kyle Dubas' big-ticket move last year to trade Nazem Kadri for an average Alex Kerfoot and, essentially, a year of Tyson Barrie simply did not work. Barrie did not bring the elite offensive game he was known for in Colorado to Toronto, putting up a hugely disappointing 5 goals and 34 assists across 70 games ? his worst return since his debut season as a rookie in 2012/13.

Now with Barrie all but gone, with his contract set to expire, the only reminder of that trade is a forward who was brought in to play centre, but, thus far, has played his best games for the Leafs on the wing. It wasn't an awful season for Kerfoot, but looking at his statistics ? 28 points in 68 games, it's a considerable regression from the 43 and 42 point seasons he had with the Avalanche over the previous two seasons. Maybe we'll be kind and chalk this year up to him needing to get used to his new surroundings.

Elsewhere in the lineup, the likes of Kasperii Kapanen, Andreas Johnsson and Ilya Mikheyev had reasonable seasons. None of them particularly tore up any trees with their play and, with the Leafs needing to make some moves this summer, they should all be considered expendable. I'm going to go out on a limb and say goaltender Freddie Andersen could also face the chopping block. There have been question marks over his ability to carry the Leafs to a win when it matters most for a couple of years now. In his four seasons in Toronto, the team has never failed to make the playoffs, but has also never managed to win a playoff series. Some responsibility for that has to fall on their goaltender, who was particularly disappointing in Game 5 of the Columbus series on Sunday.

You may notice a few names I have not brought forth for debate. The Big Four as they are known ? Auston Matthews, John Tavares, Mitch Marner and William Nylander account for almost half of the Leafs' salary cap. Never in the salary cap era has a team invested so lop-sidedly in its offence. The three highest earners ? Matthews, Tavares and Marner ? are amongst the ten best paid players in the league.

There is a belief throughout Leafs Nation that Toronto would be best served trading one of their four stars for help on the blueline. Unless Dubas is about to do a complete 180 on his vision for what this Leafs team is and can be, I wouldn't bank on that happening. And, honestly, that's a good thing for Leafs fans, regardless of how you may feel today.

It wasn't that long ago that the Edmonton Oilers found themselves in a position where, they felt, they had an abundance of offensive talent and would be willing to sacrifice one of their star forwards to shore up their defense. That June 29, 2016 trade, where the Oilers sent Taylor Hall to New Jersey in a straight swap for solid, but certainly not spectacular d-man Adam Larsson has to go down

as one of the worst trades of all time.

Now, I'm not suggesting Dubas would be boneheaded enough to make a trade like that. I'm simply pointing out that by dangling, say, Mitch Marner, the Leafs may not get as good a return as you may think. For one, that eye-watering five-year \$10.9 million contract is enough to make at least half of the NHL to back out before negotiations can begin. Marner is an elite talent, but he's also a winger. It's a widely accepted fact that, in order of importance to a team, a top winger falls way below an all-star goaltender, stud blueliner, or first-line centre.

To trade Marner, the Leafs would be looking for a stellar, right-handed defenseman back, who could partner Morgan Reilly on the Leafs' top defensive line. Now, ask yourself, how often do you see top defenders traded in the NHL? There was the Erik Karlsson deal, brought on because Ottawa ownership didn't want to pay him the \$11.5 million a year he's now getting in San Jose. Going back a few years, there's the Seth Jones deal, when he was traded to the Blue Jackets as a highly-touted, but largely untested youngster from a stacked defensive lineup in Nashville. Who went the other way in that deal? Centre Ryan Johansen, who, at the time, was coming off a couple of hugely successful years playing the number one centre role, and who the Predators believed they could build their offense around.

Unfortunately, I don't see the Leafs getting anywhere near the kind of package that would warrant getting rid of someone as talented as Marner. Instead, they're going to have to look at some of their secondary contracts ? like the Andersens, Kapanens, and Johnssons to make a move. With Cody Ceci also set to leave, CapFriendly is projecting the Leafs will have around \$4.5 million in cap space this off season, with some RFAs still to sign.

If it were up to me, I'd explore any and all options to move Andersen, who is set to enter the final year of his contract with the Leafs. Maybe a package of Freddie with a Kapanen gets the Leafs a solid, dependable defenseman to improve their blueline. Potential names? The Devils' Damon Severson has been touted, so too has Minnesota's Jonas Brodin. Either of those guys would be a huge upgrade on Ceci, and could help to stabilize the blueline alongside Reilly and Jake Muzzin.

It's going to be a tricky summer for Dubas, but for those banking on a considerable, Big Four-like blow-up? I wouldn't count on it.