

Silent Leafs Took It As if It Were Lives And Not Just a Living

By SCOTT YOUNG

They are professionals, of course. Get paid to play the game. So at the end, is it like when a man picks up his lunch bucket and heads for home? Not much.

There was a big crowd surging into the aisle around the dressing rooms in the last minute, with this night the cops unable to cope.

There was the little man in the grey suit at the end of the Montreal bench who, at a word from the Rocket, the hard old player who is Maurice Richard, sprinted off with the look of mission in every bounce—and came back with the Rocket's teeth, in case there were pictures.

And there was Conn Smythe in the crowded aisle, too, down from his seat at the front of the greens, asking an aide, "Where's Selke sit?" because the score was 4-0 and the game nearly over and he was going down to shake hands with the man who runs the champions.

When the final seconds were gone and the final cry to signal this event went up from the crowd, the Leaf dressing-room was empty and deathly quiet. Over the sound of the cries and cheers from outside, the loudspeaker, voices in the corridors, came the hard clumping of a single pair of skates on the wooden floor.

Bert Olmstead. No hands had detained him on his way from the losing bench through people telling him, "Good game," and, "Tough luck," and the other things that people say. He tossed his stick, not hard, at the rack near the door. Went to his place on the bench. Said nothing.

Ron Stewart next. Larry Regan. Tim Horton. Gerry James. Carl Brewer. Clump of skates on wood, and a thud as they sat. Blue sweaters and faces wet and slippery with sweat.

No player yet had spoken. A man came in and said to Regan in a subdued voice, "They want you for television." Regan got up and clumped out.

Punch Imlach, the coach, walked in. His suit suddenly looked baggy. He walked with his coat open and his hat over

his eyes. Walked the length of the room to the drinking fountain, and the length of it back and out into a small room alone.

Billy Harris, Frank Mahovlich, Gerry Ehman, George Armstrong, the captain, came in on the thin edge of more emotion than he could control. Johnny Bower went around the corner to his place on the wide wooden bench that runs around the wall. Sat. And from him came the first words. Called out, "Buck up, gang! We did the best we could!"

No answer.

King Clancy walked across the room and spoke but no one answered. Ted Kennedy, who as captain held the Stanley Cup and grinned out of a strained and prematurely old face the last time Leafs won it, walked through and called, "It's no disgrace!" and then walked quickly out again.

Bill Harris sat against the wall at his place, motionless, almost out of sight in hanging clothes from the hook above. Bob Pulford sat on the bench, head down, and held a cold bottle of a soft drink in a straight line touching his nose and forehead and stared at the floor.

It was some time after the first shower sounded that Conn Smythe came in, a fresh-faced man in blue, who has been in a lot of dressing rooms. He went around the players one by one, shaking hands. Stopped especially by Bower and put his arm around the fair-haired, quiet man who was like Horatio at the Bridge out there sometimes. Said, "Thank you." And, "I certainly appreciate what you did."

Other directors came in and shook hands. Bower kicked a towel across the floor on his way to the shower. Bobby Haggert, the trainer, called out: "Eleven a.m. here, for the team picture."

Newspapermen were in now, and photographers. Imlach was talking—low at first and then beginning to rise: that they hadn't quit, they'd played it hard, Jacques Plante had been magnificent in goal. Then, finally, his voice rising high: "There's one sure thing, Plante's getting older every year! Sooner or later, his eyesight's going to fail."

But still there was little or no talk from the players. A low comment here or there from one to another. Olmstead was dressed and leaving before he spoke to anyone.

Just a game, of course.

Played by men for a living, as anyone in the crowd would tell you—the ones who cry that this one or that was stupid to make this bad pass or that bad check, as well as the ones who suffer and die up there in the stands when the Leafs suffer and die.

Just a game, but they had lost it, and they took it as if it were their lives, instead of their living.