

By Scott Young

Detroit Wings Never Say Die

DETROIT, March 28 — A great number of people are wondering, I am sure, why a team with the basic lack of balance of the Detroit Red Wings is able to give the mighty Toronto Maple Leafs, defenders of the faith, wards of Peerless Punch Imlach, erstwhile Cinderella team of the National Hockey League, such a lot of trouble in this prelim to the battle for what good old Lord Stanley, bless his heart, used to call "My Battered Old Basin."

(Editor's note: Only one sentence, and already the game is in overtime.)

I was discussing this fact with George Armstrong, the captain of the Leafs, last night. One instantly noticeable thing about the Red Wings is that they do not quit. If they were going to quit, they had an excellent opportunity to do so on Sunday night in the second period. Toronto scored three fast goals and looked as if they were about to run away with the game. Instead, Wings came on again, tied it, went one down again, tied it again—and could have won, except that John Bower had built his little fence of flesh, blood, fibre, hickory and kapok across the goalmouth.

"The reason Detroit made the playoffs," said Armstrong, "is that nobody could make them quit. They haven't changed."

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I keep picking up little bits of information. Great stories—but short, you know. I spent the overtime near the Leaf bench so that I would be on hand to record the first immortal pronouncements of defeat or victory.

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Noticed that Bobby Haggert, the Leaf trainer, gave Frank Mahovlich a new stick and said, "This one will do it, Frank. The winning goal is on that stick."

Mr. Imlach went by me and said, "We're going to get it. We're going to win."

And the only thing that prevents me from having these events carved in bronze and presented in my name to the Toronto Maple Leaf fan club is that I also happen to know that Mr. Gordon Howe of the Detroit Red Wings skated past the penalty timekeeper not long before the end and said with equal confidence, "We're going to get it. Right now." So, a fig for soothsaying.

Mrs. Red Kelly (did you know?) covers her eyes with her hands every time her husband gets the puck. (If he continues playing as he is, Mr. Jack Adams, who traded him away from Detroit, soon will be doing the same thing). Did you know that last year when the Kellys were married, Mr. Adams gave the bride away? Leading Mrs. Kelly to say, recently, "Seven months ago he gave me away. And now he has given Red away."

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Stafford Smythe, the Gardens director, is one of those who cannot stand the heavy excitement of a close game. He passed me once in the corridor. Put his hand over his heart and said, "What a hobby"—his hobby being hockey. When the game ended he was out on the street. All he knew was that it must be over, because the people were coming out.

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"I didn't know who had won," he said, "until I looked at their faces. Then I figured we had won, so I went back in."

One thing that interested me in my time near the Leaf bench in overtime was that sometimes a player would come off and a cry would go up for Tom Nayler, the skate-sharpener. He would come running. The player would sit on one of the steps leading up into the stands—once Dick Duff, another time George Armstrong—and profer a skate. With a little oil stone about one and a half inches long, and cardboard thin, just big enough to cover a thumb, Nayler delicately would sharpen the blade, feel it with his thumb, sharpen again.

I asked him about it later. "Sometimes in a corner when players are kicking at a puck, or trying to freeze it there, one skate will hit another and the blade will get nicked," he said. "They feel it right away."

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He also has his skate-sharpening machine here, for doing more complete jobs between periods. Last night in the first period he blew a fuse which threw a nearby ladies' powder room into darkness, causing, I would imagine, untold confusion. He also reported that by the end of Sunday, Leafs had used 60 oranges, and 60 towels.

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Another matter that I discussed last night was the question of whether John Bower, the goalie, is nervous. This is a subject that one may discuss with almost any citizen of Canada and the northern United States, without much avail. As a switch I discussed it with Bower himself. He had played magnificent goal. I commented that he had looked very relaxed. One time when a rolling puck disappeared under his skates in the goalmouth I thought he was so relaxed that possibly he was unconscious. However, it turned out that he was the only man in the rink who knew right then that his skates were together in a V so that the puck could not get through.

He's 35, you know. Mild and pleasant, big smile. Did a dance all by himself when the puck went in during the third overtime period, and someone here got a good long shot picture of the ice then—Bower dancing and the players at the other end just beginning their celebration over the winning goal.

"Relaxed?" he said. "I don't know. Some people say that I'm nervous all the time and some say I'm not. All I know is that I go out there and play goal."

Meaning that if he keeps them out he's a genius and if he doesn't he's a bum. Which, as we all know, is one of the ways of the world.