
ERIC ZWEIG

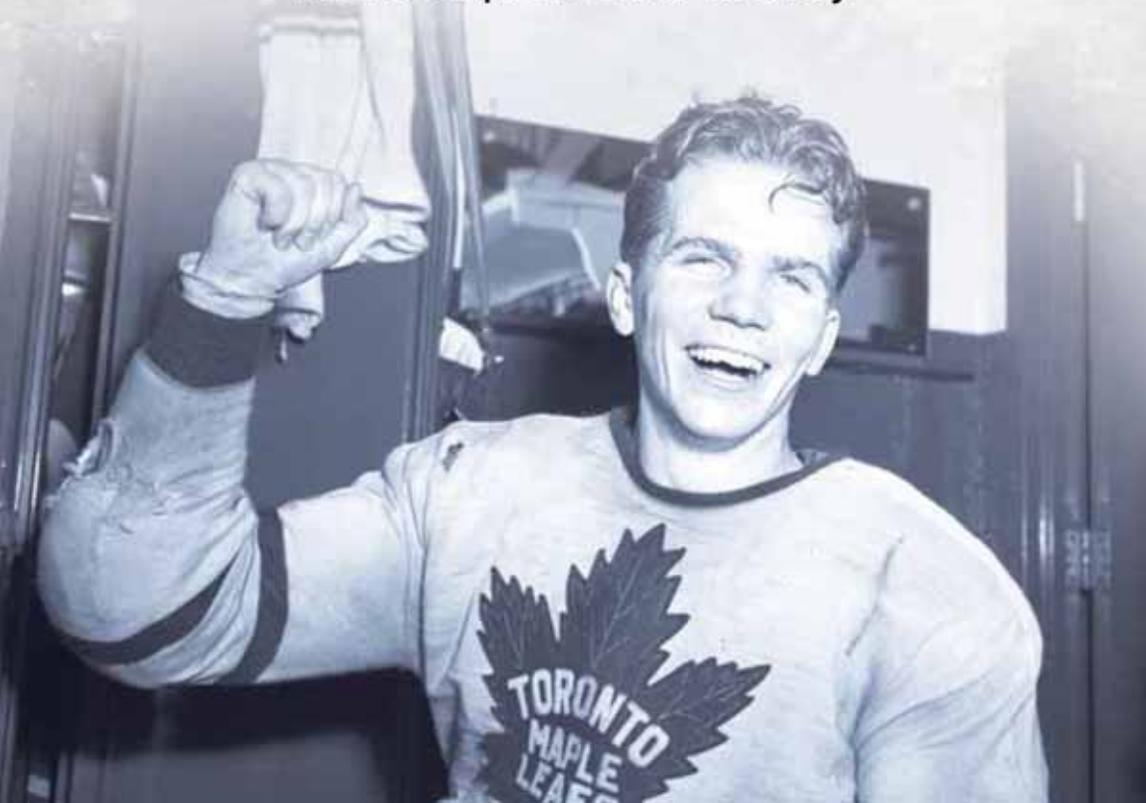
THE

TORONTO

MAPLE

LEAFS

The Complete Oral History



**A complete history of the Toronto Maple Leafs,
as told by the players, coaches, and reporters.**

On December 19, 1917, the Toronto Arenas took to the ice for the first NHL game ever played. Over the next hundred years, the franchise changed names twice, home rinks twice, and won thirteen Stanley Cups on its way to becoming one of the most successful and storied franchises in NHL history.

The Toronto Maple Leafs: The Complete Oral History gives the most comprehensive record of the team from its formation to present day. With first-hand accounts of some of the biggest names to ever play the game – Syl Apps, Darryl Sittler, Mats Sundin – as well as coaches, managers, and commentators, Eric Zweig gives readers the full insider history of Canada's most iconic team.

ERIC ZWEIG is a managing editor with Dan Diamond & Associates, the producers of the annual *National Hockey League Official Guide & Record Book* since 1984. Eric's books include *Twenty Greatest Hockey Goals*, *Fever Season*, and *Art Ross: The Hockey Legend Who Built the Bruins*. He lives in Owen Sound, Ontario.



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\$26.99 | £17.99

ISBN: 9781459736191



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Introduction

I GREW UP IN TORONTO AND ATTENDED my first NHL game when I was seven years old. The date was December 30, 1970. It was a Wednesday night during the Christmas holidays. The Maple Leafs always seemed to play at home on Wednesdays and Saturdays when I was a kid. This night, they were playing the California Golden Seals. The Leafs won the game 3–1.

I'm sure it's no coincidence that all the players who would become my early hockey heroes did something good for the Leafs that night. Dave Keon scored just 33 seconds after the opening face-off. Garry Monahan (who autographed my cast when I broke my arm in the summer of 1973) got the second. Norm Ullman set up Paul Henderson for the third. But goalie Jacques Plante became my favourite of them all. The *Toronto Star* reported that Plante was “excellent” that night. That’s certainly the way I remember it. “Plante had his moments ...” said the *Star*, “and the youngsters in attendance because of the school holidays rocked the Gardens with their applause.”

I was one of those youngsters!

My father took me to the game that night. My parents were both sports fans. So were all my cousins, aunts and uncles. It was easy for my brothers and me to become big fans, and we certainly did.

I remember being at another game with my father many years later. He looked up at the Stanley Cup banners hanging from the rafters and said, “No wonder I loved this team so much!” The Leafs had won the Cup the year my father turned seven in 1945, and then won it again in 1947, 1948, 1949, and

1951. Five championships in a seven-year span. By the time he turned 29 in 1967, they'd added four more. He didn't live long enough to see another.

I was alive for the Leafs' Stanley Cup victories in 1964 and 1967, but was too young to remember them. For me, hockey began the night of that first game with my father. To me, Jacques Plante *was* a Maple Leaf. I had no idea yet about his long and successful history in Montreal. Ullman and Henderson (who'd only been acquired by Toronto two years earlier) were, to me, every bit the Maple Leafs that Dave Keon was. On the other hand, Frank Mahovlich, who I would watch win the Stanley Cup on TV with Montreal in the spring of 1971, *was* a Canadien. In my mind, Montreal rookie Ken Dryden was a contemporary of Jacques Plante, while — when I finally learned of them — true contemporaries such as Terry Sawchuk (who had died just a few months before my first game) or Johnny Bower (who'd retired at about the same time) would seem as old to me as Georges Vezina or any other legendary name out of the past.

I loved the 1970s Toronto Maple Leafs — Darryl Sittler, Lanny McDonald, Borje Salming, Mike Palmateer — but unlike my father, as I grew up, the team got worse. Perhaps that's why I began to fall in love with their history. By the time Pat Burns, and then Pat Quinn, presided over the much-improved Leafs teams of the 1990s and early 2000s, I'd begun writing books about hockey history for adults and children, and was working with the small publishing company that produces the annual *NHL Official Guide & Record Book*.

Now, with strong new management and a host of young stars led by Auston Matthews and Mitch Marner, this book comes out as the Leafs may *finally* be poised for a return to greatness. It might still be a few years off, but at least it seems like there's reason to hope. I'd say the odds of Toronto winning the Stanley Cup five times in a seven-year stretch anytime soon probably aren't very good, but I'm guessing that most Leafs fans will settle for finally getting that first victory since 1967.

Here's hoping!



EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 7

Neilson set a target for the Leafs of cutting their goals against to under 240 in 1977–78 (down from 285 in 1976–77). They achieved that by allowing just 237. The offence declined from 301 goals to 271, but it was still a big year for the team's top stars. Lanny McDonald was fourth in the league with 47 goals, while Darryl Sittler's 72 assists trailed only New York Islanders star Bryan Trottier (77). Sittler's 117 points were bettered only by Trottier (123) and Guy Lafleur (132), who were also the only players to outpoint Sittler in the voting for the Hart Trophy as NHL MVP.

Despite a few moves during the season, Neilson remained concerned about his team's toughness at the trade deadline in March.

“Tiger was kept very busy that season ... In November, we picked up tough winger Jerry Butler in exchange for Inge Hammarstrom, and Pat Boutette chipped in whenever he could. But the three of them were almost worn out by the end of February. Neilson went to Gregory and laid it on the line:

‘We aren't going anywhere in the post-season unless we can get one more big guy to take the pressure off the skilled players.’

“‘Who?’

“‘Dan Maloney.’”

— Darryl Sittler, *Sittler* (1991)

The Leafs sent Errol Thompson (whose offence had slumped badly under Neilson's defensive system) and a package of draft choices to Detroit for Maloney. Many critics thought the Leafs gave up too much, but his new team was happy to have him.

“As tough a player as has ever played the game, and no one worked harder than he did. [He] wasn't afraid to grab somebody in the dressing room if he thought they weren't pulling their weight, and he'd lay it on the line.”

— Lanny McDonald, *Lanny* (1987)

“Maloney gives our team one of the ingredients we've been missing — that big, aggressive winger who can boss the corners. The only player in the league who's in Dan's class in the pits is [Boston's] Terry O'Reilly.”

— Darryl Sittler, who played junior hockey with Maloney in London

“He’s a first-rate big leaguer, who works hard and plays tough. With Maloney, Tiger Williams, and Pat Boutette on the left side, the right wingers in this league are not going to have much fun playing against us.”

— Brian Glennie, who’d been viciously attacked on the ice by Maloney back in 1976

“I have to play aggressive hockey to be effective and that’s the style I’ll play for the Leafs.... [It’s] a great opportunity for me, jumping to a club that’s a contender with a good shot at some big things this season.”

— Dan Maloney

The Leafs finished the year with 92 points on a record of 41–29–10. While they were once again third in the Adams Division behind Boston (113 points) and Buffalo (105), they had the sixth-best record in the NHL overall.

1978 Playoffs

The Leafs were in a slump as the regular season concluded. They’d lost 10 of 12 games down the stretch, including four straight to end the schedule. They got back on their game in the playoffs, sweeping the Los Angeles Kings with 7–4 and 4–0 victories in the best-of-three preliminary round.



Lanny McDonald’s 47 goals in 1977–78 were one short of Frank Mahovlich’s team record at the time. He would score an even more memorable goal in the playoffs that spring.

“In four days, Maple Leafs have advanced from a team in a bad slump to a club that looms as a handful for any foe in the Stanley Cup playoffs. Their efficient, decisive two-game demolition of Los Angeles Kings ... featured the ingredients of a winning playoff team — muscular, aggressive checking, opportunistic goal scoring from all forward lines and strong goaltending by Mike Palmateer.”

— Frank Orr, *Toronto Star*, April 14, 1978

“I was impressed by the way Leafs played and they’re going to be tough for any club to knock out, if they continue the pattern.”

— Kings captain Mike Murphy

It was uncertain yet whether the Leafs would meet Philadelphia once again or the New York Islanders in the next round, as their quarter-final matchup would depend on whether or not Buffalo beat the New York Rangers in their preliminary round series.

“We don’t really have a preference as to which team we play. If we can continue to play the style of hockey we used against L.A., we’re confident we can give either Islanders or Flyers a big battle.”

— Darryl Sittler

“By the spring of 1978, we were so close we could taste the Stanley Cup.”

— Tiger Williams, *Tiger* (1985)

Leafs versus Islanders

When Buffalo beat the Rangers, as expected, the Leafs faced the Islanders in the quarter-finals. The New York team had entered the NHL as a laughing stock in 1972–73 with their record of 12–60–6 that season being the worst in modern league history at the time. Building through the draft, the Islanders quickly became a powerhouse behind players such as Denis Potvin, Bryan Trottier, and Mike Bossy. They’d reached the playoffs for the first time by their third season (1974–75) and the 1977–78 campaign marked their third straight year with more than 100 points. They’d reached the semifinals in each of the three previous seasons and were favoured to do so again when they took on the Leafs.

“Islanders are a different story than L.A. — deeper, bigger, stronger, well-coached [by Al Arbour] and very hungry. Leafs must perform at the absolute top of their form to stay close.”

— unnamed NHL scout prior to the series

“We’ve worked hard on conditioning all year and we’re in good shape. The longer the series goes, the more confidence our guys will gain.... If we play as well against Islanders as we did against Los Angeles, we’ll win.”

– Roger Neilson

The series was a rough one, with the Islanders taking the first two games at home. The Leafs bounced back, though, to even things up with two wins at Maple Leaf Gardens. But the Leafs’ 3–1 win in Game 4 on April 23, 1977, was a costly one for the team.

“My most serious injury occurred during the 1978 quarter-finals against the Islanders. I was carrying the puck and tried to cut behind Lorne Henning. As I tried to shoot, he spun around to hook me and accidentally struck my eye with his stick. The pain was excruciating.”

– Borje Salming, *Blood, Sweat and Hockey* (1991)

“I was trying to check Salming and when I couldn’t, I tried to hook him. We fell backward and my stick came around and cut him. It was an accident. I bent over and told him it was an accident, but I guess he was in too much pain and didn’t hear me.... There’s no way anyone would want to see Salming hurt like that. He’s not the type of player you’d try to hurt.”

– Lorne Henning after the game

“The stick broke his nose and caused hemorrhaging in his eye.”

– Leafs eye specialist Dr. Michael Easterbrook

“I grumbled at the time about having to miss the rest of the playoffs. Looking back, however, I realize how lucky I was not to lose the eye.”

– Borje Salming, *Blood, Sweat and Hockey* (1991)

“Throughout the series there had been two constants. The brilliance of Palmateer, and the phenomenal play of Ian Turnbull. When Salming went down, Turnbull took over. He became the quarterback. He wanted the puck the way Salming always did. Ian was like a man possessed. I don’t think he ever played as well, before that series or after it.”

– Lanny McDonald, *Lanny* (1987)

“Without me, the Leafs battled even harder and extended the series to seven games. Palmateer, Sittler, Turnbull, and McDonald were all superb.”

— Borje Salming, *Blood, Sweat and Hockey* (1991)

The Islanders won Game 5 back on Long Island but the Leafs tied them again with a 5–2 win at Maple Leaf Gardens on April 28. That game featured another key injury when the Leafs’ Jerry Butler slammed Islanders star rookie Mike Bossy into the boards.

“I didn’t know he was hurt until I blew the whistle and there was a stoppage of play. I was concentrating on the puck and the play in front of the Leaf net where [Mike] Palmateer and [Garry] Howatt were going at each other.”

— Referee Dave Newell

“I never saw it. All I saw was my teammate down hurt. Look, they can hit as hard as they want to, but not with the stick.”

— Garry Howatt, who was later given a game misconduct after fights with Butler, Tiger Williams, and Pat Boutette

“He got me after the whistle. It was a cheap shot.”

— Mike Bossy

“I took him with the body in efforts to freeze the puck. It’s the kind of play that happens many times during a game. I just glided into him and he went low.”

— Jerry Butler

“I heard a little crack and I didn’t want to take any chances, so I just lay there.”

— Bossy, saying that he was never unconscious but explaining why he stayed down on the ice

Bossy was removed from the ice on a stretcher and was later diagnosed with a sprained neck. Though he would be back for Game 7, the hit may have been a turning point.

“There are times in a series when you know you have the other team, that something has gone out of them. If you had to pick a moment when the balance of power changed in that Islanders series, it was probably the

moment when Butler smacked into Bossy. We were sharp in every department, and the longer the series went the more assured we became.”

— Tiger Williams, *Tiger* (1985)

“Them Islanders are worse than done like dinner. They’re burnt toast.”

— Tiger Williams after the game

Game 7 was played on Long Island on Saturday night, April 29. The Leafs came out aggressively but the game settled into a tight-checking affair. Mike Palmateer and the Islanders’ Glenn “Chico” Resch were both outstanding, with Palmateer beaten only by Denis Potvin after a mixup in the Leafs’ zone early in the first period. The only shot to elude Resch in regulation time was an Ian Turnbull drive that tied the game at 13:42 of the second period. When no one scored in the third, the game headed for overtime, where Lanny McDonald — hampered by a wrist injury and wearing a cage to protect his broken nose — became the hero at 4:13 of the extra session.

“It’s a play we’ve tried a few times in practice, but we needed a little luck to make it work. Turnbull brought the puck up the ice and I cut into the middle to spread the defence. He flipped a high pass to me which hit an Islander [Stefan Persson], hit me and dropped at my feet.”

— Lanny McDonald after the game

“For a second [after Turnbull’s high pass], I just couldn’t find the puck against McDonald’s dark blue sweater.”

— Chico Resch after the game

“Three players — Clark Gillies, [Denis] Potvin, and Dave Lewis — were all close enough to make the play, but each was thinking the other guy was going to make it.”

— Lanny McDonald, *Lanny* (1987)

“All of a sudden, there was nobody between me and Resch and I needed an instant to realize that I was in the clear. Chico came out to cut down the angle.”

— Lanny McDonald after the game.

“I thought McDonald was going to his backhand and I wasn’t completely set for the shot.”

— Chico Resch

“I thought about a backhand, but I haven’t had much success with it. Then I saw a spot just over top of his glove.”

— Lanny McDonald

“Even after the goal went in, it took a long time to register that I had actually scored — that the series was over. It took me all the way from being 25 feet out, to skating past Resch, to circling the net before I finally thought, ‘My God, it’s over.’”

— Lanny McDonald, *Lanny* (1987)

“We beat the Islanders, who had more talent than we did, because Roger Neilson coached the series brilliantly. He never let up for a second, working the bench, prodding the players, drawing the best out of every one of us. Every night we came to play; every shift we gave the sons of bitches a little more pressure.”

— Tiger Williams, *Tiger* (1985)

“We won this series the day we got Dan Maloney.”

— Roger Neilson

“There’s no way we’d have gone this far without him. [Maloney] has done everything we expected of him and more.”

— Leafs GM Jim Gregory

“It appeared they were looking beyond us to the finals. That upset us a little. We’re a proud team, after all.”

— Darryl Sittler on the Islanders’ attitude heading into the series

“Sure, we wanted to play Canadiens again [after losing to them in the semifinals last year] because it would have meant we were in the Stanley Cup Final. But no one can say that we took the Leafs lightly and figured on any breeze. They’re just too good a hockey team for us to have that sort of outlook. Leafs got great goaltending from Mike Palmateer, a big effort from every player, and they played strong, disciplined hockey which gave us little room to operate. Sure, they played physically tough hockey with some questionable tactics. But we can’t alibi about anything. They beat us. That’s all.”

— Islanders star Denis Potvin



A cocky kid with a scrambling style, Mike Palmateer was a big reason why the Maple Leafs looked like a team on the rise in the late 1970s.

Leafs versus Canadiens

Instead of the Islanders facing the Canadiens in the Final, it was Toronto and Montreal meeting in the semifinals. It was the first time the two teams had played each other in the post-season since the 1967 Stanley Cup. The Canadiens' Yvan Cournoyer and the Leafs' Ron Ellis were the only players still on their teams from that series.

“Playing Canadiens is a lift for us because there’s something really special about a Toronto-Montreal series ... Sure, they’re a great team, but I know we’ll give them a pretty fair tussle. Beating the Islanders, who are also a fine team, is a big confidence builder for this club.”

— Ron Ellis

“The nucleus of the club is a gang of guys who have been together for about five seasons. Maybe our time has come because we’ve reached a maturity as players.”

— Ian Turnbull

But the Canadiens were just too good, and they swept Toronto in four straight, going on to beat Boston in six games for their third consecutive Stanley Cup championship. They'd make it four straight the following season, sweeping the Leafs again in the 1979 quarter-finals.

I hope you've enjoyed reading this preview of *The Toronto Maple Leafs: The Complete Oral History* ... because there's a lot more to come, and you can pre-order the book right now!

One hundred years of team history is told in ten chapters giving first-hand accounts of the highs and lows on the ice over the decades in the words of the men (and a few women) who were there. From Syl Apps to Zach Hyman, the book includes quotations and stories from superstars and role players from every era in Leafs history, as well as those from men such as Conn Smythe, Hap Day, Punch Imlach, Pat Burns, Pat Quinn and Mike Babcock who have run the team over the years. Yes, Harold Ballard too.

I found it interesting in researching this book how, in the early days of the NHL, when Toronto's team was known as the Arenas and the St. Pats, reporters rarely bothered to speak to the men who actually played the game. They just wrote about what they saw, or the gossip they were hearing. Later, when the sportswriters became more interested in quotes, it seemed only Conn Smythe spoke for the Maple Leafs. Eventually, the players had their say too, but it certainly seemed to take a while.

Whether you grew up listening to Foster Hewitt describe the action of Teeder Kennedy, Turk Broda, and Max Bentley on radio in the 1940s and '50s, as my father did, or watching Foster's son Bill cover the exploits of Darryl Sittler, Lanny McDonald, and Borje Salming on television in the 1970s as I did, there'll be plenty in this book that you'll remember ... just as there will be if your era dates back to the Kid Line of the 1930s, or the dynasty of the 1960s, or even if you've just come to the team in the Internet era of Auston Matthews, William Nylander, and Mitch Marner. (Wendel Clark, Doug Gilmour and Mats Sundin are here as well.) If you already know the history of the Maple Leafs, I think you'll still find plenty of stories to give you fresh, new insights. And even if you're not really into the team, I think you'll find the format engaging.

As is often the case when I take on a new project, I start out thinking, "this will be fun!" Or even, "this will be easy!" If you read my blog, you already know that I love to find stories in old newspapers ... but I didn't really think so much about having to find new stories over and over for 100 years! It often wasn't easy, and it wasn't always fun ... but I'm very pleased with the end result. I hope you will be too.

—Eric Zweig



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