

## Leafs' season full of question marks

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Will the Leafs' season be as exciting as their off-season was?

Leafs president and general manager Brian Burke gave Toronto's long-suffering fans quite the gift this off-season: a number of key acquisitions that could pay huge dividends in the very near future.

With the promise of obtaining a front line forward not forgotten on the minds of many fans, the news of star forward Phil Kessel's arrival in Toronto via trade from Boston was met with jubilation on Sept. 18.

Kessel, a 21-year-old sniper with incredible vision and skating abilities, selected fifth overall in the 2006 entry draft, commanded a hefty return: first-round draft picks in 2010 and 2011 and a second-round draft pick in 2010.

The move to acquire Kessel was the icing on the cake for a busy Burke this summer. Kessel will be expected to lead the offence once he returns from injury, possibly as early as November.

The exciting off-season began with the NHL draft where most Leafs fans predicted Burke would conduct a shock-and-awe campaign, similar to how, as general manager of the Vancouver Canucks, he managed to nab highly touted identical twin prospects Henrik and Daniel Sedin with the second and third picks in the 1999 entry draft.

The move was seen as a major coup d'état for Burke at the time, as the Sedin brothers have turned out to become a major cornerstone for the Canucks franchise. Burke spoke a big game and many doubters were provided with a list of his past-draft-day exploits as if to prove he would be up to much of the same.

Ten years later, he was looking to secure another set of brothers; his primary target was Brayden Schenn, younger brother of current Leafs defenceman Luke Schenn, drafted a year earlier by then-interim-general-manager Cliff Fletcher.

In the weeks leading up to the draft, Burke's voice was heard all over Toronto sports radio talk shows and in media headlines, advertising his desire to move up from the seventh position to get one of the top five ranked players.

When the draft finally happened on June 26, Leafs fans eagerly waited for a trade that never happened. Instead of moving up in the draft, a visibly upset Burke watched the Los Angeles Kings select his target Brayden Schenn.

Then, to the dismay of many Leafs fans, Burke selected lifetime Montréal Canadiens fan and avowed Maple Leafs hater Nazem Kadri, a player expected to land much later in the draft.

Though the draft did not conclude the way in which many had hoped, Burke still walked away with one of the best offensive players at his position. Kadri, playing on the same team as consensus number one John Tavares, had shockingly outplayed his teammate in the Ontario Hockey League (OHL) playoffs, which led to his steady flight up the draft lists.

Burke then prepared for free agency and managed to land Michael Komisarek, Francois Beauchemin and highly sought-after European free agent Jonas Gustavsson. He also traded Pavel Kubina for a less than satisfactory return in Garnet Exelby and Colin Stuart from the Atlanta Thrashers. Stuart was then dealt shortly after, along with Anton Stralman, to the Calgary Flames for centre Wayne Primeau.

Swedish forward Rickard Wallin was also added later in the summer. Burke's moves had a clear motive: improve goaltending and defence while promoting job insecurity whenever possible, a strategy meant to get the best out of what he has.

It goes without saying that the Leafs have much improved since the last time they skated at the Air Canada Centre. The players will no longer be asking who they will be playing with, but rather if they will be playing at all, due to the decreased job security. Will these improvements show in the standings, where it matters the most? Will these improvements show in the playoffs, where it matters the most? The playoffs are most definitely attainable if a number of factors work out for the better.

It all starts with Gustavsson and Finnish netminder Vesa Toskala. Will Gustavsson be able to share duties this year with Toskala and push him to play his best? Toskala hasn't played up to his capabilities since arriving in Toronto two seasons ago from San José, where he patrolled the nets with all-star Evgeni Nabokov.

The Leafs playoff hopes also rest in the abilities of the new arrivals on the blue line. There is no doubting their individual talent. A top four consisting of all-star Tomas Kaberle, last season's rookie phenom Luke Schenn, Komisarek and Beauchemin is nothing to scoff at, with each defender more than capable of keeping the puck out of their zone with consistency.

While the talent is there, no one knows exactly how this unit will perform as a group.

Then comes the biggest question of all: who will provide the offence necessary to win? Despite being ninth in the league last year in goals for (GF) while using a scoring-by-committee technique, the departures of Nikolai

Antropov, Dominic Moore and Pavel Kubina will hurt the Leafs' goal production. Incomers Jiri Tlustý and Tyler Bozak and second-year forwards Nikolai Kulemin and Mikhail Grabovski will be expected to pick up the slack.

Will they be able to live up to their potential, avoid sophomore slumps and deliver the much-needed points?

Heading into training camp, the Leafs are faced with many more questions than answers.

I personally have high hopes for many of the newcomers, specifically Kessel, Gustavsson and Bozak. Even if the Leafs don't make the playoffs, they should be a treat to watch this year.