

Matthews hits 30 goals in Leafs' OT loss to Habs



BY LANCE HORNBY, TORONTO SUN

FIRST POSTED: SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2017 09:57 PM EST | UPDATED: SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 26, 2017 11:58 AM EST

TORONTO - Any measure of improvement for the Maple Leafs had to start with bettering last season's 69 points and the basement finish that resulted.

With that now accomplished -- before March 1 no less -- Toronto's next challenge is battling the altitude sickness that comes with its surprise contention for a playoff spot and perhaps first in the division. That road opened up with the Montreal Canadiens in a funk, in danger of having the Leafs cut their lead to two points on Saturday night and tie second-place Ottawa.

Alas, a vintage Carey Price showed up to give Montreal its 14th straight win in the series and the 13th overtime loss Toronto has absorbed this year. The Leafs had to settle for the single point after Andrew Shaw took a flip pass from Tomas Plekanec and beat Frederik Andersen's poke check for a 3-2 win.

While defenceman Jake Gardiner thought setting the bar at 69 was pretty low this year, head coach Mike Babcock saw it differently.

"I wouldn't say it's a small step, it's huge. The big step is we're playing real hockey games that matter. The crowd (a season-high 19,800-plus) was excited, their fans were excited and it was a good hockey game at a level we couldn't play last year.

"We just have to keep getting better. We just want to get in the playoffs. We have to scratch and claw.

I thought we put a lot of pressure on Montreal at times. All and all, it would have been really nice to get the (extra) point, but we didn't."

Auston Matthews missed a hat trick with an overtime breakaway shot off Price's stick knob, but did reach 30 goals, four shy of Wendel Clark's record.

"He pretty much can do whatever he wants," said Leaf teammate Leo Komarov. "We need everyone to work like that too."

Komarov, who missed an overtime breakaway in the last game, a 2-1 shootout loss to the Rangers, agreed the Leafs are leaving too many points on the table.

Andersen was denied his 25th win again, deciding a split-second too late to come out after Shaw.

"I thought I had a play on it, I thought I was going to get it but he was able to."

The 1-0 Leaf margin on Matthews' first goal turned into a one-goal deficit as Price dropped a curtain. But Matthews broke free for his second of the night. Zach Hyman, cursed on the scoresheet of late, provided another of his hard-won assists, hunting down a puck and centring to Matthews, who fought off Alexei Emelin and elevated the puck past Price.

"He could score from two feet in or 20 feet out," praised Hyman. "A great player."

This was the last of seven straight Hockey Night In Canada games for the Leafs against four divisional teams who also happen to rank highest among their rivals, the Canadiens, Sabres, Bruins and Senators. The Leafs would've liked to have done a bit better than 2-3-2, but the six points coupled with points in nine of the past 12 games, the Leafs are very much alive for a playoff berth.

"These are the fun games you want to play in, but we have to be better," Hyman said.

The next test for the Leafs is three games in California next week against the Sharks, Ducks and playoff-challenged Kings.

The Leafs came into the game minus Mitch Marner and defenceman Connor Carrick, then lost another early in the day when Tyler Bozak was scratched with an infected hand. Bozak and linemates Connor Brown and James van Riemsdyk were all kept off the ice Friday with Babcock confident all would face the Habs.

SUN+ Smith was in Bozak's place at the morning skate. He and Frederik Gauthier lost own zone draws as the teams fought for first-period momentum, leading to a Jake Gardiner penalty. Andersen and the Leafs survived it with a big save on Nathan Beaulieu. Going back the other way, a makeshift line with Matthews and van Riemsdyk clicked, a Matthews shot hitting a Canadian and going straight towards Price's five hole where he couldn't find it with van Riemsdyk and his own man swatting at it.

Andersen and Montreal captain Max Pacioretty had some close-ups all night, the latter ending 130 minutes and 47 seconds of scoring failure for his team in the second period. Though Pacioretty beat him on a one-timer with Nikita Soshnikov serving the third Toronto penalty in less than 28 minutes, Andersen stood his ground on a breakaway by the same player moments later. Nikita Nesterov's shot was stopped by Alex Galchenyuk's skate and flicked past Andersen, having been left alone by both Nazem Kadri and Morgan Rielly.

"That was the goal coming into the season, to be in this kind of position," Matthews said after the morning skate. "Why not (think big)? We just want to continue to play well, do things right and things will take care of themselves."

BABCOCK ITCHING FOR MARNER'S RETURN

If this keeps up, the Leafs medical staff is going to put a restraining order on Mike Babcock.

The Leaf coach has kept insisting through Mitch Marner's five-game absence with a shoulder injury that he would've been a lot faster to activate the rookie right winger than what he sees as an overly cautious approach by club doctors. The rookie right winger, who was Toronto's leading scorer when hurt in a game in Columbus, was kept out again Saturday against the Canadiens.

Babcock seemed to want to underline his point by using Marner in the Saturday morning skate, as a defenceman, to make it a round number of eight with Connor Carrick's injury. Marner didn't seem to be labouring and was having fun breaking up 2-on-1 rushes.

"He looks to me like he's the best player out there today," Babcock said. "I don't know why he's not dressed tonight."

The day before, when Marner's condition was brought up, Babcock did state that the doctors should have final say, but quipped "who cares what the coach thinks?"

He concluded after Saturday's game by saying: "I have to give the trainers credit, both Mitch and I were bribing them today, but they held strong. I think they'll let him out of jail soon."

So Marner, who is still on injured reserve, could play Tuesday in San Jose. Carrick, has not been seen the past few days since getting hurt earlier in the week against the Winnipeg Jets. Centre Tyler Bozak had a cut get infected according to the coach and missed the Montreal game, but should play Tuesday.

LHornby@postmedia.com

