

Maple Leafs emerge victorious after OT clash with Jets



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TORONTO - In a game billed as the Calder Cup - the final rookie of the year trophy head-to-head between Auston Matthews and Patrik Laine - ill will between the Maple Leafs and Winnipeg Jets in a playoff-charged atmosphere proved the better rivalry story.

Too bad these Canadian clubs can't meet in a series other than a Cup final, as they played a second eventful 5-4 game after an October overtime home win for Winnipeg. Plenty of scoring chances presented themselves throughout Tuesday night at the rocking Air Canada Centre, some of them generated by grit, others by sloppy play.

Laine saw his rookie scoring lead shrink to two points the end of the evening as Matthews assisted on Jake Gardiner's overtime winner for his third point to Laine's two goals. The trophy debate continues, while the Leafs remain very much in the playoff hunt, countering wins by Ottawa, Tampa Bay and the Islanders to take back third spot in the division.

That superceded the Calder conversation as far as Matthews was concerned.

"This was huge," Matthews said. "They came out flying, played a really solid game and for us it's a big two points, good momentum. In turned up a notch after the second period, bodies flying around. That worked in our favour, a little kick in the butt."

Matthews was relieved his last-minute regulation penalty for sticking Nik Ehlers didn't give the Jets the regulation win. He came out of the box in overtime, well rested to send Gardiner away from the winner. Laine's two goals included a memorable one-timer blast through the legs of Leaf defenceman Nikita Zaitsev and Frederik Andersen, setting the table for his 30th later in the game.

William Nylander, who sits fourth in freshman scoring behind injured Leaf teammate Mitch Marner, had his own two-point night, burying a Matthews' bank off the backboard to make it 4-4. The two joked about working on such a deliberately wide shot, but as Nylander explained, that was without a goalie in practice. Nylander extended his team -high 19 power play points.

"We gave up a lead, we had to battle back, it was a good game," Nylander said. "We've played well against big teams (such as Winnipeg) and we want to keep going."

Winnipeg was missing a couple of defencemen to injury and Jacob Trouba to suspension, while the Leafs played the last two periods without defenceman Connor Carrick, who suffered an upper body injury.

Leo Komarov, in the hunt for a hat trick by the end of the night, scored at 1:02 of the game and continued to hook up with Nazem Kadri and Josh Leivo to keep the offence rolling in the absence of Marner, who lost his scoring lead in the past few days he's been idled.

In one of the most bizarre finishes to a period, the Leafs tied it 3-3 in the second with a last-minute power play goal, a Nylander saucer pass to Komarov. But trying to put an exclamation point on the period, Kadri blasted Ben Chariot into the boards. That brought Dustin Byfuglien off the bench with the intent to retaliate - and with teammates distracted by thought of Big Buff devouring Kadri, Laine came down Main St. with no one really watching, scoring with two seconds still on the clock.

"Early in the game we were good and Freddy wasn't," observed head coach Mike Babcock of his man facing just 20 shots. "Then he made some good saves down the stretch. Some nights Freddy picks us up, tonight we picked him up so I thought that was positive."

A Finnish national scored the first goal, but not Laine and not in a conventional way. Komarov, from deep in the corner beat Connor Hellebuyck, who was in a kneeling position for some reason and had it rattle between his pads and in.

SUN+ The Leafs are better offensively with the injured Marner, the line juggling has resulted in Leivo as an excellent addition to the Komarov-Kadri shutdown unit. Leivo assisted on Komarov's first goal, then in the second period chipped it to Kadri as two Jets converged on him. When the open Kadri pirouetted to pot his 25th, it was Leivo's eight point in nine games.

Kadri tried to bring down grizzly bear Byfuglien behind the Jets net and was sent to the box, during which the same Jet uncorked a blueline shot that popped out to Bryan Little for a 2-1 goal to give him 26 points against in Toronto in as many games. Winnipeg thought they'd made it 3-1, but replays showed Byfuglien high-sticked a point shot in with 5.1 seconds remaining in the perios.

Laine reached 30 goals, Matthews has 28, but goals don't guarantee a Calder. In 1985-86, Wendel Clark had 34 (still the Leaf rookie record for now with Matthews closing fast). But Clark only had 11 assists and his Calder support seemed to erode in polling beyond beyond the Eastern Time Zone.

Calgary defenceman Gary Suter, who deserved to be in the running for playing a harder position for a rookie, received 35 first place votes to Clark's 18, leaving some Leaf officials privately wondering if owner Harold Ballard's antics had not cost Clark some votes. Compare that to 1994, when Teemu Selanne's 76-goal year in Winnipeg earned him all 50 first place nods, leaving a group including Leaf goalie Felix Potvin (who had 15 second place votes) in his dust.

The Jets have had a productive Eastern swing, with points in all four games. Babcock wanted some muscle to counter Byfuglien and their big forwards, which led to Marlie call-up Frederik Gauthier activated for fourth-line centre duty with Ben Smith sent to the press box. The Leafs complete the week's home stand with the Rangers on Thursday and Montreal on Saturday.



Leafs win 5-4 OT over the Jets

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