

Marner-less Maple Leafs fall in Battle of Ontario

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If the Maple Leafs can't win some games in the Battle of Ontario, it adversely affects the bigger picture in the Battle of the Atlantic.

And that will have more consequences in the Eastern Conference when the eight playoff spots are decided in April. Toronto, clinging to eighth, came up short in another big test Saturday at the Air Canada Centre, already missing top scorer Mitch Marner, needing a win against the Ottawa Senators to even the season series and reverse some Saturday night setbacks against other division rivals. But the Sens persevered, 6-3, padded by two empty-netters.

While the excitement factor was certainly evident as the Leafs came back from a two-goal hole and briefly held a lead, some nagging problems persisted as Toronto lost momentum as the third period wore on and the low-octane Ottawa offence somehow produced 40 shots on the defence-challenged home side.

In six of seven consecutive Saturdays against their greatest rivals — the Sens, Bruins, Sabres and Canadiens — the Leafs' record is 2-3-1 with one remaining next week versus Montreal.

"It's crucial for sure," said centre Nazem Kadri, who did manage his 24th goal. "(Ottawa) is a team that has been finding a way these past couple of weeks. It's certainly time to get points and we're in a bit of a funk here (3-6-2 in the past 11 might be called a slump), but we're not too worried about it. We have to go into Carolina (Sunday) and be optimistic about coming out with two points."

The Leafs got on the plane to Raleigh still clinging to the final berth in the East, but the crowd of teams was massing behind them and Florida had a West Coast match that could've bumped Toronto out.

"We're aware of those games in hand we had and still have," defenceman Morgan Rielly said. "But they only matter if you win. That makes tonight all that tougher."

Ottawa, which opened a five-point lead on the Leafs, answered Toronto's three-goal uprising by Rielly, Kadri and a William Nylander power-play goal by the midway point of the third. Mike Hoffman and Derick Brassard scored, Brassard's on the power play, while Kadri was arguing his holding penalty from the sin bin.

The Leafs were on the verge of being buried much earlier in the game, down 2-0 and the Sens on a near full-term 5-on-3 when Matt Martin and penalty-killing wiz Zach Hyman went off 11 seconds apart. But the Sens were too slow in execution and Frederik Andersen was composed between the pipes. That was the cue for Rielly to avenge being on ice for the first two Ottawa goals, taking an Auston Matthews' pass and beating Craig Anderson low. Then came a late second-period goal from Kadri, after Nikita Zaitsev's shot had rolled just wide of an empty net. Kadri found the puck behind the net and banked it in off Ryan Dzingel who had fallen in the crease to help his goalie.

After missing on their own 5-on-3 in the first period, the Leafs went ahead with Zack Smith in the box, Matthews dishing to Nylander.

There was some familiar Battle of Ontario skirmishes all evening, spiced up with Leafs hit leader Matt Martin jousting with Dion Phaneuf, Kadri getting under the Sens' skin and Chris Neil activated from the press box to hit anything in blue and white that moved.

The absence of Marner for the weekend games put Josh Leivo, Brown, Nylander and the returning Nikita Soshnikov in the spotlight. Brown took Marner's spot with Bozak and James van Riemsdyk, leaving Nylander to continue an all-rookie line with Matthews and Hyman.

"Obviously, I don't go to (Matthews-Nylander) often, so I don't like it that much," Babcock said Saturday morning.

"They're both talented guys who can shoot the puck, (but) there are only so many shooters on the line. What I like about (having Brown there regularly) is that they're getting the puck to Matthews all the time and it's not a bad deal because he shoots it in the net a lot. I like to spread those guys out. I'm sure Willy would like to play with Matty, so here's your opportunity. How long you get is up to you."

Leivo, who made the most out of his chance when fourth liner Soshnikov was hurt, has proven to have excellent on-ice rapport with Kadri, adding another assist Saturday.

SUN+ (assistant coach) D.J. Smith is skating the living crap out of him every day,” Babcock said when asked why Leivo came into the lineup with such jump and surged to five points the past two games. “You’re in the best shape of your life and suddenly that makes you a step quicker. If you’re really determined and you think you have the skill set — and he does with a really good mind, heavy hands, heavy shot — and you work and you wait for your opportunity.”

Much of that was undone by giving up the first period goals to Dzingel and Chris Wideman. Mark Stone assisted on both and was in on the empty-netters for five points in total. Nylander and Matthews had multi-point games with Marner missing, Matthews now tied for first on the team with 48 and battling Patrik Laine for top spot among all rookies. Nylander is at the 40 mark, too.

But the trenches are where these divisional and conference games will be decided.

“It’s a dog fight against everybody,” Ottawa coach Guy Boucher said of the playoff race.

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Leafs and Sabres

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