

State of the Union Address: The Toronto Maple Leafs.

Mr. Burke, Mr. VP, members of the Leafs brass, distinguished guests, and fellow Leaf Fans; we have reached an important mark in our season. Only ten games remain, and we are but six points out of a playoff spot. These final weeks are crucial if this team is to succeed where others have failed. It has been six long years, and with another close call around the corner, we've got some things to discuss. First, why we're in this position again, and second, what we have to look forward to.

The ultimate goal is to win a Stanley Cup. Everything you do as a member of an NHL franchise is in pursuit of one - the first step, building a contender. It would be wrong to say Brian Burke hasn't done things to make this team better. The faces of this franchise are here because of him: Team captain Dion Phaneuf was acquired two years ago in a headlining deal from the Calgary Flames; leading scorer Phil Kessel was parlayed from Boston for two first-round picks and a second – one of which would be used to draft Tyler Seguin - and Kessel's wingman, Joffrey Lupul was stolen from Anaheim for Francois Beauchemin. All of that being said there are some things Burke has yet to acquire.

Since the departure of Mats Sundin, the Leafs have been without a definitive first line center – arguably the most important position on any team. The problem is that these kinds of players are rarely available. However, “rarely” is the word, not “never,” and the Leafs have looked in several places for one recently.

At the end of the 08/09 season the Leafs picked up sought-after collegiate center Tyler Bozak from the NCAA. Bozak, 24 at the time, would make the jump almost immediately into the NHL. He would start with the AHL's Toronto Marlies, but would later be called up to play the remaining 37 games with the Leafs where he was part of their most offensively explosive line. However, after a dreamy entrance into the NHL, Bozak would struggle mightily in his second season – leaving some to doubt his potential.

The most recent attempt was last off season. With the Rangers beating back any offers for coveted free agent center, Brad Richards, the Leafs had to settle for injury-prone, Tim Connolly. After a devastating injury during the 2006-2007 season – which forced him out of the line-up for all but two games – Connolly would play only 88 games over the next two years. Regardless, the need was too great. Burke desperately required a talented passer like Connolly to center his natural shooter, Kessel.

After 60 games in a Leaf uniform though, Connolly has failed to impress. He lost his number one job to Tyler Bozak, and has been anchored on the third line.

With playoff feigning playoff hopes, some fans have turned their sights to next season. Why? Well the reason I suspect is twofold. First, Nazem Kadri will be ready next year,

and if he's not, then I'm afraid that's all that will be written about him (at least in a Leaf uniform). Second, so should Joe Colborne.

Nazem Kadri:

Drafted in 2009, 7<sup>th</sup> overall, Kadri was touted as the most offensively gifted player in his draft class; and as such, he is suspected to have exactly what the Leafs are looking for: grit, speed, and skill. However, so far Kadri has been unable to keep a spot on the Leafs roster. He has spent the last two seasons between Ricoh Coliseum, and the Air Canada Center.

The biggest knock against Kadri's game is his defensive reliability. Due to this fact, and Kadri's poor job at the faceoff circle, he was moved by former coach Ron Wilson to the wing.

Kadri has played a total of 49 games at the NHL level: recording 18 points (seven goals). He has shown his offensive skills solemnly, but there have been flashes of brilliance. Kadri is teetering on the fence, and from call up to call up has demonstrated improvement. He could be a key player next year, or another Leaf prospect bound for life outside the bright spotlight of the A.C.C.

Joe Colborne:

Burke picked up Colborne last year in a trade with Boston that saw career-Leaf, Tomas Kaberle leave the team. Colborne has the perfect frame for an NHL centerman, standing at 6'5" 214 pounds. He was a 2008 first-round pick – selected eleven picks after Toronto snagged Luke Schenn and only one pick before Jake Gardiner.

Consistency has been an issue for Colborne since college, and his stats in the AHL reflect this criticism. His first year with Boston's farm team saw him garner 10 points in 12 games, but the following year he had 26 in 55. Last year he finished the season with the Marlies and recorded 16 points in 20; and following almost the same trend, Colborne collected 37 points in 54 games.

Like many young players, Colborne is going to need to develop his consistency, but if he can get passed this obstacle, I'm certain he can be an impact player for the Maple Leafs.

To end this off I would just like to say: The Leafs are back! And those who spoke about another decline don't know what they're talking about. Thank you, Ameri... I mean Leaf Nation.