

Legacy in the Making

TORONTO
MAPLE LEAFS

In 1917, when the National Hockey League (NHL) launched, the Toronto Maple Leafs, initially called the Toronto Arenas, took to the ice as one of the inaugural teams. Early on, the team earned a reputation for winning. The Leafs, as their fans affectionately call them, won the NHL's most prized trophy, the Stanley Cup, 13 times between 1918 and 1967. But then the winning stopped. It has been nearly 50 years since Toronto's team has won the Cup. As they look forward to the 100th season, the Leafs have cemented a legendary new leadership team that is working to build the next era of championship hockey in Toronto. The Legacy Lab spoke to **Brendan Shanahan**, President and Alternate Governor of the Toronto Maple Leafs, and Hockey Hall of Fame inductee, not only about the Leafs' storied past, but also about his ambition surrounding the team's legacy in the making.



Cups going back to 1918. But when I grew up, the team was not great. They have not been a consistently good hockey team since about the time Harold Ballard took over in roughly the 1960s and 1970s. Still, growing up, I always felt that Maple Leaf Gardens, the place where they played, and the blue and white colors they wore, were magical.

What's happened over the last many decades, the lack of sustained success, has been unfortunate. And it is one of the main reasons why I was attracted when I was approached to take over the team. I wanted to come back to my hometown and do my best to restore the team to its origins. The Toronto Maple Leafs should be the New York Yankees of hockey.

All of us fans can imagine what it would be like if, what it would do to this city if, we turn this team back into a winning franchise and a championship team. I think every person in hockey, probably even our closest rivals, the Montreal Canadiens, and their fans, would want to see it.

Can you tell us about those aspects of the Toronto Maple Leafs' origin that drew you to wanting to run one of hockey's most storied franchises?

■ I grew up in Toronto. To me, the Leafs were something I watched every Saturday night. I identified them with

Hockey Night in Canada on the CBC. I'm sure the rest of the country identified their local team with *Hockey Night in Canada* too, but I always felt like it was the Leafs' show.

The Toronto Maple Leafs were a dynasty. The team won 13 Stanley

When you think about restoring the team to its origins, what parts of the past are priorities for you to bring forward into the modern era?

■ I am working to restore aspects of the team's winning identity, established in the Conn Smythe era, and also aspects of the team's winning culture, rooted in the great Maple Leaf players from the past.

When I think about the great legacy of the Toronto Maple Leafs, Conn Smythe is among the first names that come to mind. Conn Smythe went from being General Manager to the principal owner of the team. He got Maple Leaf Gardens built during the Great Depression. And he fought in both world wars, including forming a regiment, an artillery battery, in the Second World War. The Leafs won eight Stanley Cups, all on his watch. The MVP trophy in the playoffs is called the Conn Smythe Trophy. He is a legend on this team and in the sport.

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When Conn Smythe took over the Toronto team in 1927, he was concerned that the team, once called the Arenas and then the St. Patricks, was at risk of being moved to another city. So he had the wisdom to rebrand. He renamed the team the Toronto Maple Leafs because he said they were Canada's team, and in turn, he said they should wear Canada's maple leaf. The image he chose of the leaf was the same one he wore on his regiment's badge in the First World War.

When I took over the team, one of the things I wanted to know was why they ever changed from that team sweater and winning identity: a championship logo, inspired by Canadian soldiers and also by Conn Smythe, who fought alongside them. There's a little bit of symbolism in my mind that since that happened, there have been no Stanley Cup champions here in Toronto.

Additionally, when it comes to team culture, after the Smythe years and during the Ballard years, the past was sort of left behind. For whatever reason, whenever a great Maple Leaf player was nearing the end of his career, he wasn't just moved, traded or let go—he was treated poorly and dumped. There wasn't a tremendous respect for the past. In contrast, when I played in Detroit for the Red Wings, things weren't that way at all. We were inspired by photos of Ted Lindsay holding the Stanley Cup. Players were inspired by stories about Gordie Howe. When I played in Detroit, Ted still

worked out in our weight room. Gordie still had a stall in our dressing room. We weren't intimidated by or disinterested in the team history. We drew inspiration from the past. I want to bring that regard here to Toronto. I want to reconnect with our team's championship past.

Bringing aspects of the team's winning identity and culture forward are priorities for me.

Consistent with your aim to restore some of the team's original identity, the Toronto Maple Leafs recently revealed a new crest to coincide with its 100 years in the league. Can you share some of the details that went into the change?

■ As we sought to mark the 100th year, we took a good look at all the different Leaf uniforms—the different markings and the subtle changes that occurred from year to year. In the end, we focused on what we felt was the first dynasty of the Leafs—the Syl Apps and 'Teeder' Kennedy era. Guys who played on Conn Smythe's team. We cleaned up a few of the details to make it sort of new, and we matched some of the details to make it part of our current and ongoing story.

Now on the top part of the new leaf, there will be 13 veins that represent 13 Stanley Cup wins, 17 veins in total that represent the founding of the hockey team in 1917, and 31 points that reference the opening of Maple Leaf Gardens in 1931. If we win more Cups, we can add more veins. There

are lots of little details like these that we thought of. We also lobbied the NHL to make our new crest a little bit larger than they typically make crests. We fought hard for that. We want the crest to be this big badge that we wear proudly on our chests.

Earlier you remarked upon the importance, the inspiration, that can be derived from revering the players of the past. What role, if any, do the team's alumni now play in shaping the identity of the current Toronto Maple Leafs?

■ Players respect guys who have played the game, guys who have played in this city, and especially people who have won in this city. We rely on those alumni that set a standard that everybody now sort of has to fight hard to keep. That standard has slipped in the last decade or two.

Unfortunately, some of the players that have Stanley Cup rings from the Toronto area are really getting up in years. It has been a long while since this team has won. But when you are given the rare opportunity to sit and talk with them, legends like Red Kelly and George Armstrong, they are really interesting guys. It is fascinating to hear from a guy who might be in his 70s or even his 80s talking about when he played the game. You come to understand that the only difference between him and the 47-year-old former hockey player or 27-year-old

current hockey player is age. We all played in pressure situations and made the same sacrifices, and are willing to do whatever it takes to win.

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We all know that what is most important is what our current Maple Leafs are doing now. But I do think it is very healthy, important and inspiring for the young players to visit with these alumni. The alumni get a lot out of it too. For context, it is like when college alumni come back to visit their old school teams. It means something to them when their team wins. Today's Leafs are not just playing for themselves. They are playing for the ongoing legacy of the team. If we win a Stanley Cup, we are winning it for Syl Apps and 'Teeder' Kennedy's family. We are winning it for Darryl Sittler, Börje Salming, Wendel Clark and Mats Sundin, and lots of great Leaf players who never saw a champion-

ship here, but who will come back to see it happen.

One of the grand gestures the team has made to restore relations with its alumni is to celebrate and cement its hockey heroes in the recently established Legends Row. Can you tell us a little about the creation of Legends Row?

■ Shannon Hosford, Vice President of Marketing and Communications, Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment Ltd., came up with the idea of Legends Row. There is a historical committee that makes decisions on who gets into it. I had the good fortune to arrive into my position in time to make the very first invitation to the family of 'Teeder' Kennedy, Johnny Bower and Darryl Sittler. More recently, I got to participate in an induction ceremony that included Dave Keon. There was an entire generation of players and fans that never knew Dave Keon, that never got to see him play, that got to be acquainted with the legendary franchise player via Legends Row.

I think that any time you have the opportunity to receive a statue, that someone wants to make a statue of you, you must have done something pretty special. A statue is permanent. Even when you are gone, your statue will remain. What I feel makes Legends Row particularly noteworthy is that we do focus on a team of honorees from across generations. No great player ever stands by himself in Legends Row because he never stood by himself on

the ice. He was always surrounded by teammates. The idea that we can have a great Maple Leaf from the '40s or '50s standing next to Mats Sundin, and they're both now immortalized, is, I feel, very special. Further, it allows us to signal to our current players that they are, today, at the very beginning of giving themselves an opportunity to be added to Legends Row in the future. And it allows us to bring a new generation of fans back to the enduring story of the Toronto Maple Leafs too. This is, very much, about tapping into the past to inspire today and tomorrow.

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You implied the importance of fans, and generations of fans, in creating enduring relevance for the team. Beyond building bridges via Legends Row, how do you engage fans, old and new, with a team that for so long has not been winning?

■ We are fortunate in that our games are constantly sold out and that so

many older hockey fans are loyal to this team. There is a waitlist to get Leaf tickets. They are passed down from generation to generation. I know our fans have been frustrated over the last several decades. But there is also this eternal optimism here because we all know what this city would turn into, the excitement that would ensue if we had a winner. So as much as the team has struggled in recent years, there is still the hope that the team will turn it around, and if you had given up your seats you would kick yourself because you may never get them back.

With that said, rather than attack 10 symptoms, I am more the type of person to go after the root cause of the problem. And the real problem is that the team has not been winning. We have kids who are 7, 8 and 9 years old who have grown up in Toronto, who probably would love to love the Leafs, but they've had no reason to. We are missing an entire young base of kids who, in the current day and age, can watch their choice of 12 games on any night and do not have to watch a Leafs game. And if they do want to watch playoff hockey, they have not watched the Leafs in a long time. We have missed a generation over the last many years that are now Kings fans, Hawks fans or Penguins fans.

I could easily get distracted by trying to tackle each and every single problem we face, or I could instead stay focused on building a winner. All the symptoms related to apathy among a next generation of fans

are likely to go away faster when we can build a winning team. I can't undo all of the past. But I can work to rebuild a winning culture and a winning team in Toronto.

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You have talked about the importance of restoring a winning culture to the team. Beyond looking for inspiration from players from the past, who are the contemporary leaders responsible for building that winning culture today?

■ Head Coach Mike Babcock and General Manager Lou Lamoriello have joined as instrumental leaders in rebuilding a winning team starting now. Mike is the only hockey coach in the esteemed Triple Gold Club: Olympic gold-winning coach, Stanley Cup-winning coach, and World Championship gold-winning coach.

Lou Lamoriello has been recognized by the Hockey Hall of Fame in the Builders category as one of the game's great architects of championship-winning teams. Lou is the only current general manager in the Hockey Hall of Fame. Together, Mike and Lou bring real credibility and stability to the team.

With Mike as the coach, there's a great feeling our current players have when they're sitting on the bench. They are not going to be happy with him every day. They are going to be worked hard. But the guy calling the shots is probably the best coach in hockey today. Years ago, I played for Scotty Bowman. I remember looking across at the other teams' coaches and thinking that our coach, the very best in his day, was in their head just like Mike gets into the heads of opposing coaches now. Mike brings a confidence into the dressing room. If you carry out his game plan, you are ultimately going to be successful. Mike's all about winning. That's what keeps our players feeling motivated.

With Lou as the GM, he provides another level of leadership. Lou's not on the bench, and he is not in the dressing room. He is not telling you which players on the other team have weaknesses in certain areas. But he is making sure our entire organization, from the coaching staff to the office staff, are professional and work hard always. Lou will not be outworked.

Mike and Lou, like me, are also resilient. If you are a weak leader, this city can overrun you and influence

your decisions. None of us have signed up to build just a respectable team. We are all here to help build a championship team. As I said earlier, the Toronto Maple Leafs should be like the New York Yankees of hockey. We are not there right now. But that's what we're working to change.

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In sports, there often seems to be pressure for teams, especially those with storied franchises, to win now. In contrast, your leadership team seems to be taking the long-term view. Can you tell us a bit about that choice?

■ There are certain people that, like certain mountain climbers, will always choose to climb the easiest hills in order to make progress. And there are those who instead will always choose to climb the hardest hills, the highest mountains, in order to go further. Our team leaders like Mike and Lou—plus people like Mark Hunter, Kyle Dubas, Jacques Lemaire, Brandon Pridham and so many others—are all the second

type: It is programmed into their DNA to climb higher in order to go further. None of us have to be here. We all do want to be here.

We could take shortcuts, build a respectable team and be in the middle of the pack soon. We could build up hopes each year, taking the easier route, knowing in our hearts that we would have to get lucky to win. Or we can try to do it the hard way, the long way, and build a team that, once we arrive, we feel we're one of the five or six teams that are starting each season with a real chance to win the Stanley Cup.

The perception of the Toronto Maple Leafs when I arrived was that the team wasn't stocked with enough good talent—that we had some talented players but not enough of them. In my eyes, the big issue wasn't that the team had a talent issue so much as it had a work ethic issue. The team did not always work hard, they crumbled under pressure, they did not demonstrate grit, and they were not so willing to sacrifice as a group. They didn't behave like a team. That reality, in this city where hockey is revered, is unforgivable. In one year that has already started to change. I give real credit to Mike and to Lou because we really have not added to the lineup. To make progress, we have subtracted from it. We moved some talented players like Phil Kessel, David Clarkson and Dion Phaneuf for, in some cases, young players who are not even in our lineup yet. We moved players such as Cody Franson and Mike Santorelli, who we also really

liked, for draft picks and prospects. Through first changing the way we work, we are changing the way the Toronto Maple Leafs are perceived around the league, and that's reflecting here in town with our fans. They are now saying, 'We don't like losing, but our team is working out there and we are proud of the effort.'

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I think hockey fans here are savvy enough to understand that we are going to put a lot of effort in drafting and developing. And that approach takes time. We have been very transparent. We said to the press and our fans that we have got to dismantle things a little bit. We've got to get ourselves out from under some large contracts from players that, age-wise, do not fit with where we are going. In the meantime, we are going to be very patient with our young players. It definitely helps in this city that our team's farm club, the Toronto Marlies, are on pace to have one of the best American Hockey League (AHL) seasons recorded, and they're doing it on

the backs of our team's real prospects. They are not doing it on the backs of 28- and 29-year-olds. They are succeeding right now with our 20-, 21- and 22-year-olds who represent the future of our NHL team.

There is a generation that has mostly known the Toronto Maple Leafs to be one of hockey's punch lines. They might remember the trade that brought Doug Gilmour to Toronto or the one that also brought Mats Sundin here that gave the team a little spark, a couple of mostly short playoff runs and a tiny window of hope. But now we have to keep our ongoing ambition in perspective. This is about finishing and not just having a two- or three-year window. We want a championship era. We want the next great dynasty.

Brendan, you have already accomplished a remarkable career, a Hall of Fame-celebrated career, as a hockey player. Now, what legacy do you aspire to create in your role as the president of the Toronto Maple Leafs?

■ I'd like to start the next era of this team by trying to prolifically win the Stanley Cup again. Trying for one Cup to start, but more to follow.

When I was a player, before a game, people would often say, 'Good luck tonight. Score a goal.' In return I would say, 'I'll try.' Some people would confuse my response with a lack of confidence. Someone asked

me what I meant by saying, 'I'll try' versus saying, 'I will.' And I explained that I can't make myself score. It is the same for winning the Stanley Cup. You cannot make yourself win the Stanley Cup. But what you can make yourself do is practice your shot, practice the quickness of your release, practice going to all of the right spots, and work to have the fitness to get to the right spot at the right time so you can get four, five or six shots on goal. That's what I meant when I used to say to people on the way to a game, 'I'll try.' I was going to do all the things that I know would get me the highest probability of getting a puck past the goalie. It's the same approach here with how I am trying to win a Cup.

We want to build an organization that gives itself the highest probability to win year after year. We want to become one of those five or six teams that each year, you know, barring an incredible run by one of the others, are going to have a shot at winning the Stanley Cup. You and I could sit here right now and say one of these five or six is going to win this year. The rest are going to have a fun round or two, maybe an upset, but one of these five or six are going to win it all. We want to be one of those five or six, and we want to be one of those five or six for as long as possible. But then to get over that last little hurdle you do need some breaks and some luck. So you want to do all that you can to increase your odds and chances of being one of the teams that has put itself in a posi-

tion with hard work and with commitment to have a chance to win.

It's always easier after you've won one to say, OK, now let's win a few. I want to do what L.A. is doing and what Chicago is doing. But we're just going to work hard and try for the first one for right now. The first one is the hardest.

Given your experience with the Toronto Maple Leafs so far, what advice would you give to others trying to build a successful brand legacy?

■ Have an ambitious vision. Be clear and honest with everyone on your team about what it is. Surround yourself with people who are committed to it. And stick with it.

I came to build an era of championship hockey in Toronto. I was purposefully quiet with the media in my first year. I had a vision in my head, and I wanted to learn for myself, in that first season, which ones in the organization wanted to be a part of it. The season ended on a Saturday. The day after, on Sunday, we let roughly 26 people go in the management group. Then, I think on Monday, we held a press conference. It was my first time ever having a press conference like that, and I got some good advice: Be brutally honest. That advice actually transcends addressing the press. Whether it is with owners, players or staff, be clear and honest about your vision. People don't like surprises, and they don't like being misled. It was freeing for

me to say that this is what we are, this is what we're not, this is what we want to be, and this is what we're going to try to do. And we're not going to stop until we get there.

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I kept hearing from people that the fans won't have the patience for the long-term build, but I don't believe that. Some people blame the press—that the press isn't patient and they fuel the fans. But I don't believe that either. I think even if you are the most cynical journalist whose stuff might be very unflattering to me, I still think at the end of the day this is a person who wants to watch the Maple Leafs win a Stanley Cup in his or her lifetime. We all want to do this. The question is, 'Who has the stomach to stick with it?' It definitely takes personal toughness and perseverance, but it also takes support from a good group of people that you trust in leadership roles who all have the same sort of stomach.

Anyone in the Toronto organization can have a plan. The hard part in Toronto is not coming up with a plan or vision. The hard part in Toronto is sticking with it.

As the Toronto Maple Leafs approach their 100-year anniversary in the NHL, the team is finding new ways to reinvigorate its franchise: not by ignoring its past, but by referencing it. The current leadership group is reapplying aspects of the team's visual identity from their most prolific championship years, reintroducing inspiring players from past generations to the next, and even recognizing past accomplishments as part of a living monument proudly called Legends Row. None of this is meant to pull the team backward; all of it is intended to help bring the past forward—to reestablish a championship culture for the present and future. Leadership is actively mobilizing a vital community of hockey players, media and fans around a culture and set of behaviors that celebrate winning above all. Instead of taking shortcuts to achieve only near-term success, they are choosing to invest in achieving enduring rewards: not doing what is easiest, but doing what is best and sometimes hardest, all in pursuit of creating the next winning era of hockey in Toronto. At nearly 100 years of age, the Toronto Maple Leafs are focused on writing, not reading from, the pages of hockey history.

BY MARK MILLER

Mark Miller is the Chief Strategy Officer at Team One, an ad agency with global expertise and proprietary research into premium categories and aspirational consumers.