

Sports

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Iafrate feels right at home

By Brad Emons
staff writer

The fans never filed out of Joe Louis Arena more disgruntled. Red Wing diehards were insulted by their team's latest escapade.

By contrast, the Toronto Maple Leafs' dressing room was buzzing over their come-from-behind 5-4 victory Thursday night over the Wings.

The Leafs, fighting to stay out of last place in the National Hockey League's Norris Division, erased a 4-0 deficit capped by Peter Ithac's game-winning goal with three seconds left.

For Al Iafrate, the Leafs' 19-year-old defenseman from Livonia, the feeling was just right. He was home for the holidays and playing before family and friends.

Once he dreamed of playing for the Wings, but now he had a part in beating them, collecting two assists on the night.

"It's always a thrill to play here," said Iafrate, who left 25 complimentary tickets. "We knew this was the biggest game of the season so far and we arose to the occasion."

THE VICTORY by the injury-riddled Leafs put them ahead of Detroit by five points in the playoff chase.

"This is the biggest victory of my career, but my career hasn't been too long," Iafrate added. "But it's still a pretty good feeling."

With injuries to Borge Salming, Brad Maxwell and Wendel Clark, the Leafs' defensive reins have been handed over to the Bentley High School product.

"You can see Al's grown up in a year," said Toronto Sun beat writer Jim O'Leary. "He's rushing the puck more and playing with confidence. The last two months he's been their best defenseman. And he's the best 200-pound (plus) skater in the league."

Iafrate, who made the U.S. Olympic Team at 17, came to the Leafs with high expectations after being taken fourth overall in the 1984 NHL Draft. But the talented defenseman has

been beset by mishaps, which have been well chronicled in the press.

Before his rookie season, Iafrate was charged with careless driving when he flipped his car near Toronto. Then he was charged with mischievous behavior in an incident over in Windsor.

AND WHEN HE reported to training camp, Iafrate weighed in at a hefty 241 pounds. Then he was involved in a fight with Buffalo's Sean McKenna during an exhibition game, fracturing his cheekbone and nose. So distressed, he left training camp and spent two days at home, contemplating his hockey future, only to return to the Leafs.

With his jaw wired shut, Iafrate missed the first five regular season games.

"That was the best thing that ever happened to him," said O'Leary. "He couldn't eat so he lost the weight in a hurry."

"Right now he's everything the Leafs expect and even ahead. They're happy with him, and they'll be patient with him."

Toronto coach Dan Maloney, according to O'Leary, is Iafrate's biggest booster.

"In all fairness to Al he had a tough season last year," said the Toronto coach. "But he came back through some tough times."

"He can be as good as he wants to be. He has all the tools. He's a big man and a powerful player."

THE 6-FOOT-3, 220-pound defenseman feels more comfortable with his role.

"It's probably all confidence," Iafrate said. "When you're not confident, you start to hesitate and that leads to mistakes. Right now I know when or when not to rush the puck."

The statistics show that Iafrate is better than a year ago. Through Thursday night he had three goals and 18 assists for 21 points.

It appears he's already turned the corner. His point total all last season was 21.



DAN DEAN/staff photographer

Al Iafrate of Livonia has come a long way since his days on the 1984 U.S. Olympic hockey team. He is a front-line defenseman with the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Briggs caught in coach's vise

The scene: Knoxville, Tenn.

The site: a hotel on the grounds of the 1982 World's Fair.

The pavilions have become skeletal. Only a global-like structure remains.

"Big Orange" is the talk around town. University of Tennessee fans flow when they talk about their upcoming game with Miami in the Sugar Bowl.

Meanwhile, the University of Tennessee was also hosting a basketball tournament, appropriately called the Volunteer Classic, the weekend of Dec. 20 and 21. The participants: Tennessee, University of North Carolina-Wilmington, Furman and Baylor.

Basketball plays second fiddle to football in Knoxville. Neyland Stadium fills 90,000 on a football Saturday, while merely 10,000 file into an antiquated place for basketball called Stokely Athletics Center. They make you sit in folding chairs instead of cushioned seats.

It was opening night of the Volunteer Classic and I found myself standing in front of the Will Call window with Washington Bullets' scout Bill Gardiner.

IRONICALLY, Gardiner had to pay \$7 for his ticket, while I got in for free.

"It's our league's policy," said an apologetic Tennessee coach Don DeVoe to Gardiner in the lobby.

"At LSU they treat to a buffet meal and a seat right on the floor," grumbled Gardiner.

We were both there primarily for the same reason — to see former Schoolcraft College All-American Carlos Briggs play.

You remember Briggs? He was the gunner who led the nation in scoring at 30 points per game at Schoolcraft. He also averaged 20 points per game last season, second to only Arkansas' Joe Kleine in the Southwest Conference.

Briggs and his Baylor teammates have been in the news a lot lately, not for winning basketball games, but for what penalizes the NCAA has planned.

Baylor has been caught cheating and is awaiting the gullotine.

THE TEAM'S top seven players including Briggs, were almost left home. They were scheduled to be suspended for the Volunteer Classic. Baylor President Dr. Herbert Reynolds, who cooperated with the investigation on the al-



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leged violations, appealed the suspensions, winning a stay of execution.

The NCAA still plans to put Baylor on probation, but its case has been put before a review board.

Baylor is paying for the sins of coach Jim Haller, who was fired at the end of last year in wake of the disclosures.

The Baptist-affiliated school, tarnished by allegations of payoffs and blackmail by some of its players, rectified the situation by hiring a Bobby Knight clone — Gene Iba from Houston Baptist.

Iba's bloodlines are rich. He's the nephew of former Oklahoma A&M and longtime U.S. Olympic basketball coach Hank Iba.

Iba copies his uncle to a fault — strict man-to-man defense and a continuous passing game offense.

THE LAW according to Iba: When you make a mistake, you're coming out of the ballgame. When you're late to breakfast, you don't eat. When you don't practice hard the day of a game, you don't play.

With little time to recruit, Iba was forced to cope with Haller's players, strictly playground types from such places as the Bronx, Brooklyn, Detroit and Dallas.

Briggs, a fifth-year senior guard, is currently riding a rollercoaster.

He averages 13 points and leads the team in steals and assists despite getting only 18 minutes a game. But he's been suspended three days from practice because he hasn't worked hard enough.

He also missed Saturday night's consolation game with Furman (a 59-55 Baylor win) because of his work habits. It was only a weekend earlier that Briggs was named to the Drake Classic's All-Tournament team after scoring 18 and 17 points, respectively. He played only three minutes against Vanderbilt (an 84-61 loss) because of his practice habits. But in the opening

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Who said hockey was only a kid's game?



Paul Carey of Canton tries to limber up prior to game time in the adult National Novice Hockey Association housed in Westland.

By Tom Henderson
staff writer

Brian Hackett, 8, leaned against the outside of the boards at the Westland Multipurpose Arena Sunday night and watched the skaters awkwardly work their way around the ice. "I sure wish I was out there, now," he said wistfully.

Out there, 30 novice hockey players — all of them adults — were learning how to play the game. Brian's dad, Dan, was one of them.

In a neat reversal of roles, Brian hollered occasional encouragement when his dad skated by. Brian wore a green jacket, with hockey patches on the arms and chest. One of them proclaimed Brian, a winger for the American Speedy Printing team in Canton, a member of the hat-trick club, meaning he has scored three goals in a game, a standard of excellence. Usually, it's his dad cheering for him.

"He's always coming to my games. I figured I'd come and watch him," explained Brian, his eyes scanning the rink. "There he is: No. 30, HEY, DAD!"

THAT'S WHAT happens to a lot of our players," said Greg Campbell. "They never played hockey when they were kids, but now that their kids are playing, they get into it and want to learn how to play themselves."

Campbell works for the National Novice Hockey League, the brainchild of a Washington, D.C., businessman named Ashley Root. Seven years ago, Root, who had become a fan of the Washington Capitals of the NHL, decided he wanted to learn to play. That's easier said than done for adults, who are expected to know the game when they join teams.

"Root joined a men's league and paid his money," explained Campbell, "but he never played and when he did, he never touched the puck."

So, in 1980 Root formed a four-team instructional league in Washington for adults. Today, there are NHL leagues and more than 5,400 players in 14 metropolitan areas — New York, Detroit, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Chicago, St. Louis, Phoenix, Los Angeles, San Di-

ego, Philadelphia, Boston, Hartford, Denver and Washington.

This is the first year in Detroit for the league. Campbell, a Sarnia, Ontario, native who played in travel leagues there, arrived here in November from Los Angeles, league headquarters and its hottest city, with 54 teams, to organize things. Already, the league has 14 teams and rents weekly ice time in six arenas — in Berkley, St. Clair Shores, Westland, Melvindale, Wyandotte and Fraser. "We projected 12 teams, so we're pleased," said Campbell. "And we've got a waiting list for people who want to sign up."

"These guys aren't too bad, actually," said Campbell, referring to the skaters loosening up in front of him. "They're novices, of course, but novices in Detroit aren't like novices, say, in Phoenix. Here, everybody's at least skated before."

Campbell said the league is doing well everywhere but Hartford. There were 18 teams in Chicago last year in the first year there, and 36 teams this season. Next year, the NHL anticipates expansion to Montreal and Toronto. After nine weeks of skating, drills and lessons in mechanics, the players begin an eight-game season in late January.

The fee is \$208 for ice time, lessons, coaches and referees, plus \$85 for helmet, face mask, simulated National Hockey League jersey and stockings. The player supplies the rest of his equipment.

Coaching in Westland is Harold Vella of Livonia, a veteran of the Livonia house leagues, Franklin High School and the University of Michigan-Dearborn. Recently, he has coached the Livonia Bantam Blues and the Livonia Spirit Blues.

WANTING TO PLAY hockey is understandable, but why would any adult want to learn how to play goalie? "I think I'm crazy," explained Chuck Morris, 38, of Canton taking a breather during practice.

For information on joining next season, call Campbell at 954-9250.