

McKnight eyes another Habs-Nords classic

BY DOUG HARRISON

The Acton Tanner

Despite being a Toronto Maple Leaf season ticket-holder for 25 years and watching the Buds put together their best season in history, Acton's Ron McKnight still has trouble pointing to one game this year that erases a quarter-century of mediocrity.

Why?

Well, three reasons come to mind. First, McKnight, a former Acton Rotary Club member, is a Montreal Canadiens fan and has been for the past 38 years.

Second, based solely on the first reason, this automatically relegates him to anti-Leaf status.

And the third reason is, McKnight can't shake the glory days of real hockey and his most

enjoyable moment sitting in venerable Maple Leaf Gardens — attending an Original Six Montreal-Toronto classic.

It was December, 1966, when McKnight, then 17, was enrolled at Scarborough Variety Village. He was taking a commercial course at the vocational school for physically handicapped teenage boys.

Big hit shakes Gardens

"It was a Saturday night at Maple Leaf Gardens in the days of Jean Beliveau, John Ferguson and Leaf players Larry Hillman, Dave Keon and Frank Mahovlich," begins McKnight, now 44.

"I was sitting in the west side (penalty box side) red seats between centre ice and the blue line. I remember Ferguson hit Hillman

into the side boards and you could hear it all over the Gardens. They got into a fight that Ferguson won and it went on for three or four minutes. It was better than a World Boxing Council fight and waste talk around here for two weeks."

The Acton native says he saw the greatest rivalry in the history of the National Hockey League.

"It was pre-expansion, Original Six hockey," he marvels. "It was when the NHL was the NHL — 120 players in the league, the cream of the crop and best of the best."

'You see good hockey'

McKnight never roots for the Leafs unless it benefits the Habs.

"I take the razzing but it rolls off like water off a duck's back," says McKnight, who adds that he's of the 10 per cent of season subscribers who didn't purchase playoff ducats.

"Toronto always plays better against Montreal and it's too bad you only see the Canadiens at the Gardens once or twice a year. You see good hockey, from a spectator's point of view."

And from a spectator's viewpoint, McKnight was asked by *The Tanner* to be a playoff prognosticator and pick division finalists.

Predicting the division-winning Chicago Blackhawks to come out of the rough and tumble Norris Division unscathed, McKnight hints Buffalo could surprise the Boston Bruins in one of two Adams Division semi-final matchups.

"I think Boston has a chance because Cam Neely's back, but Buffalo's going great guns," offers McKnight, who did 11 years of scorekeeping back when NHL player Mike Hudson was involved in Acton minor hockey.

"Buffalo's Pat LaFontaine is hotter than a firecracker and Alexander Mogilny has come into his own, although I'm not partial to Russians playing in the NHL."

La Belle Province is the sight for the heated first-round clash between the Canadiens and Quebec Nordiques.

McKnight's hoping the young and talented Nordiques don't prevail over the Habs, who sat atop



Acton native Ron McKnight, a 38-year Montreal Canadiens fan, will be glued to the tube for the next two weeks. His main focus is the Montreal-Quebec Nordiques first-round NHL playoff battle. (Doug Harrison photo)

the Adams Division for the bulk of the season before hitting a lull late in the year to finish in third-place.

Habs must stay healthy

"I hope the Nords don't win," understates McKnight, a dispatcher for 19 years at the Town of Halton Hills. "I'll be the laughing stock around here if they do. My phone won't stop ringing. If Montreal stays healthy, though, they'll get out of the division."

McKnight likes the Pittsburgh Penguins in the Patrick Division because of Mario Lemieux, the team's depth and Scotty Bowman, the winningest coach in the league.

And, he says, Vancouver will emerge from the Smythe Division

due to the strength of Kirk McLean in net and the talents of Pavel Bure, Trevor Linden and Geoff Courtnall. He adds the braintrust is solid with "a very knowledgeable hockey man in Pat Quinn."

McKnight admits his highlight for any Stanley Cup playdown was the 1984 battle between — you guessed it — Montreal (who won the best-of-seven 4-2) and Quebec at the Montreal Forum.

"I went with a close friend of mine, Brian Lewis, who's now the NHL's director of officiating," explains McKnight, who claims to know 98 per cent of NHL referees. "He phoned me on April 15 at 9:30 am and said he was leaving for Montreal. He said he was the stand-by official for that night (Game 3) and the referee for Game 4. He asked me if I wanted to go and I said, 'Would I?!'"

"We took the 2 pm flight out of Toronto, saw the games on Sunday and Monday night and flew back to Toronto Tuesday morning. And from there I headed to the Toronto Blue Jays' home opener. That was a real sports weekend." For a real sports fanatic.



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