

Weekender

Sports

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Thomas looking for pay hike

By FRANK KING
 Sports Editor

The on-ice action may be through for the season, but hockey is still on the minds of players like Markham's Steve Thomas.

The 23-year-old Sherwood Forest Drive resident is in that group of National Hockey League types who have played out their contracts and are now free agents.

Thomas, who collected 35 goals and 26 assists for the Toronto Maple Leafs last season, had a two-year deal (plus one option year) that paid him a measly \$80,000 per campaign.

This means that while he's doing his usual summer routines (playing charity slow-pitch with the Leafs and keeping in shape via the Markville Ball Hockey League), his thoughts are on contracts.

And don't let that 'free agent' tag fool you. Thomas is anything but thanks to NHL rules that force any other team signing him up to compensate the Leafs.

Not that the one-time record-setting Markham Waxer wants to leave Toronto.

"The Leafs are still first in my book," he explained in an interview. "But they have to come up with enough money for me to stay. I know there are a number of other teams interested."

The rumour is that Thomas, a left winger, wants a three-year contract (plus an option year) for about \$200,000 a season. When questioned, he didn't deny it.

He also didn't deny that his second choice to play would be a U.S. team, where he'd make more money.

Thomas isn't doing the actual bargaining, though. He isn't even at the negotiating sessions with Leaf General Manager Gerry McNamara. That's all left up to his agent, Mississauga's Don Meehan.

And Meehan has a good product to offer. Since joining the Blue-and-White full-time two seasons back, Thomas has steadily upped his production.

He scored 15 goals more than last season, though his playoff totals didn't come close to matching 1986. But apparently there's a good reason for that.



Markham's Steve Thomas has been a big hit with the fans since joining the Toronto Maple Leafs two years ago. Here, he signs autographs for

eager children after a Leaf practice in Markham.

— Bill Lanning

As soon as post-season play arrived, Thomas was taken off his line with veterans Rick Vaive & Tom Fergus (or Peter Ihnacek, when Fergus was hurt) and teamed up with others like Russ Courtnall & Vince Damphousse.

That move, supposedly done to throw off Toronto's first-round opponent (St. Louis), probably threw off Thomas instead.

"I didn't know whether I was coming or going," he recalled. "I don't want to use this as an excuse, but why couldn't (coach John) Brophy leave the lines alone? I don't understand it."

That was the only complaint he had with Brophy, who took over as coach after Dan Maloney refused owner Harold Ballard's ludicrous contract offer and joined Winnipeg.

"They're both the same sort of coach," assessed Thomas, who also played for Brophy at Toronto's American Hockey League affiliate in St. Catharines (now in Newmarket).

"They leave players alone



Here's a more youthful Thomas, during his Markham Waxer days.

who are producing. They're both hard-working and both get a lot of respect from the players."

So did Brophy lean on Thomas? Apparently yes, at first. But by season's end everything was honky-dory.

"If you slack up, he gets on you. I didn't need that, and he realizes that now. But he was constructive in his criticism."

And maybe it did some good, too.

"I learned a lot more about defensive hockey with Brophy," said Thomas, who's 68-goal season with the 1981-82 Markham Waxers set an Ontario Junior Hockey League record that may never be broken.

He did it in tandem with Adam Oates, who won the league points title that year and is now one of the Detroit Red Wings' better players.

Thomas and Oates met for the first time in playoff action this year, though it wasn't that big a deal for the Markham District High School graduate.

"Adam played well in the playoffs, and we'd talk a little on the ice. But there's not much time to talk, so I didn't associ-

ate with him much. Adam still doesn't have the wicked skating ability, but everything else is there."

Thomas had lots of opportunity to watch his former linemate, since Detroit and Toronto renewed a long-dormant playoff rivalry with a seven-game battle that finally went to the Red Wings.

"Detroit was a little stale in the first few games and we capitalized on that," said Thomas. "But after that 3-1 lead (in games) I don't know what happened."

"The Red Wings just started to go," he continued. "I think we figured we could just breeze into the semi-finals."

What didn't help were a series of injuries to Gary Leeman, Chris Kotsopoulos (his cousin Perry played for the Waxers last season), Mark Osborne and Tom Fergus.

It was a different story in the St. Louis series, which the Leafs won without much problem.

"We played perfect hockey," Thomas explained. "We played Brophy's plan to a T. (For example, we had two guys going to the net for rebounds, which we didn't do during the season.)"

Maybe more strategy like that would have saved Toronto's regular season, which started with a bang and ended with the Leafs scrambling to gain a playoff spot.

"It was a real up-and-down season; more up than down," said Thomas. "I don't really know why. We had the momentum going, then all of a sudden we were watching teams go by us. It was disheartening."

He has other thoughts on the season — specifically the torturous length of it.

"I played 102 games this year, and the guys in the finals must have been close to 120," he pointed out. "The regular season takes enough out of you (without exhibition and playoff games)."

He can't see cutting the regular season, though. But chopping the number of pre-season games (Toronto had nine this year) and going back to a best-of-five first-round playoff series both meet with his approval.

Unionville racer aims for the top

By ED ROGERS

Scott Maxwell's climb to a professional racing career has moved as fast as the blur of a vehicle on a straightaway.

And his drive for success — to the heights of Formula 1 or Indy-type cars "if everything goes right" — is apparent even in a short conversation with the 23-year-old Unionville resident.

"I couldn't imagine doing anything else right now," he says, coming across as a level-headed and down-to-earth enthusiast — that is, if the earth is asphalt and below the rubber grip of racing tires.

"Everything seems boring after you race," he says.

This year marks Maxwell's second as a professional driver after a four-year stint climbing the amateur ranks.

A busy racer this year, Maxwell takes on the challenge of the Rothmans Porsche series and tackles the speed of Formula 2000 cars in the Motormaster series.

And Maxwell says he is going into the two series with

confidence — a confidence based on substance.

In 1986, the young driver finished fourth overall in eight Player's Challenge Camaro-Firebird races from a field of 80 drivers.

And behind the wheel of a Porsche 944, he took overall fifth in a field of 40. He also raced in two 24-hour endurance races, co-driving to a victory.

In his first year of car racing, after five years in junior kart competition that yielded two Ontario championships, he was named rookie of the year by the Canadian Automobile Sports Car Club.

Two years later, in 1984, the Canadian Race Driver's Association's named Maxwell top amateur driver. And last year the same association gave him their award of merit.

The racing adds up to a lot of speed, speed he's grown comfortable with. So what is most uncomfortable about his chosen career?

"I find that the worst part is when you're sitting in the grid waiting. That's the only time you can feel ner-

vous," he explains.

And at the drop of the flag, the nervousness gives way to intense and necessary concentration. In 15-lap races, one lapse of concentration can blow a chance for success.

"It's total concentration on the job at hand," he says matter-of-factly.

In fact, his concentration goes beyond track level. To help promote himself, among other reasons, Maxwell spent three years at Seneca College, graduating in advertising in 1985.

Perhaps Maxwell was groomed for the sport since he was young.

"I've been around the track since I was six years old. I've never been away since," he notes, adding his father was a racer and now owns MiniGrid on Hwy 7, that features detailed models of racing cars.

MiniGrid, where Maxwell works part-time in the winter, sponsors his cars as well as MEI, STP and Rothmans.