

# A great year to be a Toronto Maple Leaf, Joseph says

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on his right eyebrow in a separate incident.

Returning to the Maple Leafs this past season as a free agent and inking a two-year plus an option contract, Thomas said this season was by far the most enjoyable in his professional career which has included stops with the Chicago Blackhawks, New York Islanders and New Jersey Devils.

"This was the most fun I've ever had in hockey. I can't say enough about the group of guys here. The guys bent over backwards for each other."

### JOSEPH MADE GREAT DECISION

Suffice to say the Toronto Maple Leafs got the best of the great summer-of-'98 free-agent goaltender derby.

On the day Joseph signed a \$24-million contract to tend net for the Leafs, some observers felt he had settled for the consolation prize, since the Leafs had missed the playoffs for two consecutive seasons.

But in the end, Joseph, who grew up in Sharon watching the Leafs on television every Saturday night, chose the Maple Leafs — a franchise that had mostly befuddled its fans for more than three decades.

"Obviously, it was a great decision and worked out great," said Joseph Tuesday, the morning after the Leafs were dismissed from Stanley Cup duty at the hands of the Buffalo Sabres.

The general consensus right now is that people are excited again about the Leafs in this city.

"I felt in my heart when I made my decision to run with it and never looked back," he said. "I firmly believed this was the place to come to. I hate to lose, it's not a nice feeling looking down the ice and seeing (Buffalo) celebrating, but you just hope to capture it and remember for next season."

Save for the Flyers, whom the Leafs eliminated in the first



STEVE THOMAS

Seriously hurt shoulder before Buffalo series

round of the playoffs, the other teams interested in signing Joseph missed the playoffs altogether.

Joseph, meanwhile, received the lion's share of credit for leading the Toronto franchise to the third-best record in the Eastern Conference and a berth in the semifinals.

You have to believe the Leafs have received their money's worth so far.

"That's definitely an easy question," said Kris King, Joseph's regular carpool partner during the season. "Curtis. Everyone knew what kind of goalie he was to play against, but until you see him practise and in games, you aren't really sure."

"He established our identity as an offensive team. When a goalie can bail you out as many times as he did, it makes a difference."

The fact is, Joseph, along with a number of other factors, including the off-season acquisition of head coach Pat Quinn and player additions such as Bryan Berard and Steve Thomas shot the Leafs back to respectability in a city that loves its hockey team, but has been spurned so many times.

The trick now, of course, is ensuring the franchise continues to move in that direction.

"We came a long way and turned a lot of heads," agreed Joseph. "Definitely the bar has been raised and expectations will be high. We'll be thinking Stanley Cup right off the start of training camp."

A terrific regular season, followed by a successful playoff run, the closing of fabled Maple Leafs Gardens and the dawn of a new era at the Air Canada Centre are solid cornerstones for the franchise heading into the next millennium.

"The general consensus right now is that people are excited again about the Leafs in this city," said Joseph. "It was a great year to be a Leaf, that's for sure."

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