



PHOTOS COURTESY THE TORONTO STAR

Keswick native Curtis Joseph (left) will be in goal for the Toronto Maple Leafs tomorrow night when they open the Stanley Cup playoffs in Ottawa. Markham's Steve Thomas (right) hopes to bounce back from a sluggish regular season. The Leafs are decided underdogs in the best-of-seven series.

Leafs play for upset in Battle of Ontario

York Region products buckle up for 'all-out war' starting tomorrow

From page 1.

26 assists.
 "The year didn't go as well as I thought it would (during the regular season)," he said after Tuesday's practice at the Air Canada Centre. "I started with a cut on my knuckle and I missed three games and then I had a knee injury and missed 22 games and I had the flu during the year."

"Just when you start to feel good, something else seemed to happen."
 "But we have the playoffs to make amends. There's an opportunity to go out there and prove you can contribute to the team."

In recent days, Thomas said he's been feeling good from a physical and mental standpoint. And it couldn't come at a more opportune time for him and the team. His goal in last Friday's second-to-last regular season game against the host Chicago Blackhawks enabled the Maple Leafs to emerge with a hard-fought 1-0 win and lock up a berth in the playoffs.

"Sure I feel good about (scoring against Chicago). It's a big goal for me personally, and for the team it was huge. That's what motivates me."

"To get in the playoffs, those little things give me tons of confidence. It's little things like that that give me a jump start and that's what I try to run with."

Playing on a line centered by Mats Sundin and Gary Roberts (who has family living in Stouffville) patrolling the left side, Thomas acknowledged the Senators will be a formidable opponent. But, he thinks, they aren't invincible.

"They're a talented team, but I think we



KEITH ACTON: Stouffville resident, who won a Stanley Cup as an Edmonton Oiler, says Leafs must take the body against the Ottawa Senators.

can beat them physically. If we get the first-man pressure I think that's where we can be successful and I think we have to exploit that," said Thomas, who tallied a team-leading six goals and two assists in last year's first-round victory over the Senators.

Adding to the club's optimism are the lessons of history.

Maple Leafs goalie Curtis Joseph experienced that first-hand when, as a member of the Edmonton Oilers, he helped backstop them to a first-round upset victory over the Dallas Stars in 1997.

In that series, the Keswick native recorded two shutouts in helping the Oilers overcome a

three games-to-one deficit to turn back the Stars in seven games.

"We were an underdog that year," the 33-year-old veteran netminder recalled. "But as the series went on, we firmly believed we could win."

"As I said earlier, you have to believe in your heart that you'll win."

Although he sported a 4.00 goals against average against the Senators in their regular season meetings this year and appeared rather mortal down the stretch run, Joseph is confident the team will come together.

"I believe we can play good defence and be physically. That's what it'll take to win. We have to play awfully well, no doubt about it."

Thomas believes that Joseph's history of rising to the occasion will be a factor in the series.

"Cujo likes opportunities to be involved in the game. That's where he shines. When he's busy he plays his best hockey," said Thomas. Joseph, in 68 regular season games, recorded a 2.39 goals against average and had six shutouts, including the one against the Blackhawks that sewed up a playoff spot for the Maple Leafs.

Thomas played minor hockey in Markham and junior with the Markham Waxers. Joseph grew up in Sharon and Keswick and played junior in Richmond Hill and King City. He now lives in rural King.

In addition to the players, the Maple Leafs' coaching staff, which includes Stouffville native Keith Acton, believe they can give the Senators a run for the money.

"They play a real disciplined game," the first-year assistant coach noted of the Senators. "They're a lot like the (New Jersey) Devils. They both wait for you to make a mis-

take with the puck; then they're terrific in the transition game."

"We have to beat them at their own game. Be patient and not make those turnovers."

"They're not real physical, so that can be a key for us to come out hitting and taking the body. That's not their game," said Acton, who toiled 15 years in the NHL with six teams before retiring six years ago.

Acton knows what it takes. He played for the Stanley Cup-winning Edmonton Oilers in 1988 and worked as an assistant coach with the Philadelphia Flyers and New York Rangers

"It's an all-out war every other night for the next two months. It's the team with those character players that will succeed; that will still be playing in June."

— Keith Acton of Stouffville, Toronto Maple Leafs assistant coach

before moving full-time back to Stouffville last summer. Acton has a good idea what characteristics are required to bring home Lord Stanley's holy grail.

"It's an all-out war every other night for the next two months," said the Stouffville minor hockey grad. "It's the team with those character players that will succeed; that will still be playing in June."

Being in the trenches, Thomas can think of nothing better than to be playing hockey in the spring.

"There's no more fun than game one in the playoffs. That's what we strive to get ready for. It's an exciting time of the year that I enjoy."

Solitary confinement is highly underrated.

Commercopia
 Markham's Destination Gift Shop

OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK

Happy Easter

An uncommon collection of bath, body, and home products.

106 Main St. N., Markham Village (Hwy 48) (905) 471-1820

Men have the upper lip.