

Play-off hopes abounding

# Thomas on life with the Leafs

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**Q.** How are you getting up for the playoffs, or are you just talking it one game at a time for now?

**A.** That's the thing we're discussing right now. Right now people are probably thinking we're too cocky, that we've made the playoffs and we don't have to do anything anymore. But right now is a good time to prepare. If we're not winning games that could bring a negative result at the beginning of the playoffs.

**Q.** Do you think you're going to get past the first round?

**A.** I think we have an excellent opportunity to win the whole division. Whenever we come out and play against Minnesota it's always a lacklustre effort and there's no real reason why. If we just come out and play the way we have against Chicago and the better teams in the league we can win this division because we know we can beat Chicago and we also know we can beat St. Louis. So if we play the kind of hockey we know we're capable of there's a possibility we can win the division.

**Q.** How do you handle the press, like when you get bad reviews. Does that get you down?

**A.** All through the season we've had bad reviews in the newspapers. I don't even read the newspapers anymore. It's not really worth it. If you want to go out there and play confidently and you always read in the newspaper that the Leafs do this terribly and the Leafs do that, it's not worth it. You lose the confidence you have going into the game especially reading this in the paper.

**Q.** You were playing so well before Christmas and then you got into a slump. What's happening there?

**A.** I don't know that happened there. I wish I could put my finger on it but I can't really. I've had a lot of chances but I just haven't been able to put the puck in the net and it's something that baffles me.

**Q.** Do you find it harder keeping up for a game?

**A.** Every game I'm ready to play but things might happen during the game that will frustrate me—maybe I'll miss the net on an excellent opportunity to score—and for me if I miss the net or something like that, and I do have a good chance, then it seems like I've let the team down.

**Q.** What about the Leaf's consistency problem, do you have any answers for that one?

**A.** There's another thing I can't put my finger on. Our team could come out one night and beat the best team in the league and then come out the next night and be beaten by New Jersey or something. I can't really say. One day we're excellent and the next day we're just the shits.

**Q.** When you're playing a team like Edmonton the psyche must be a lot different than when you're playing poorer teams.

**A.** That's true. You feel that if you don't go out and play well then this team's going to run all over you. If you don't think that you're going to beat this team then you

Next week Toronto's much maligned Maple Leafs skate into some playoff hockey for the first time in three long years. Something to cheer about, right? Excalibur's two eternal optimists, Dave Byrnes and Ted Christensen thought so, and hiked down to the Gardens last Thursday to talk hockey with rookie winger Steve Thomas, also an optimist.

don't have the right frame of mind and you're not going to beat them. So whenever we play Montreal, Edmonton or Philly, it's always a good game, we're always really intense, because we don't want to be embarrassed by getting beaten. But then when it comes to playing the lower teams in the league, like Detroit or New Jersey, we've been beaten a few times. I don't know what it is really, everyone's relaxed and we just don't have the intensity we do when we play the tougher teams.

**Q.** You've been disciplining yourself for a long time for this sport. Do you have routines that you go through on a game day?

**A.** Oh yeah. I get up about nine in the morning and come to practice, for about a 10:25 practice, and we go through a light skate until about 12:00, and we go home. The around one o'clock I have spaghetti or fettuccini or something: some pasta with carbohydrates in it. And then I sit around, maybe watch a bit of TV for a while, then I go and have a sleep for an hour and a half or so. By then it's around time to go to the rink. I'm here about two hours before game time. It's a routine like that before every game.

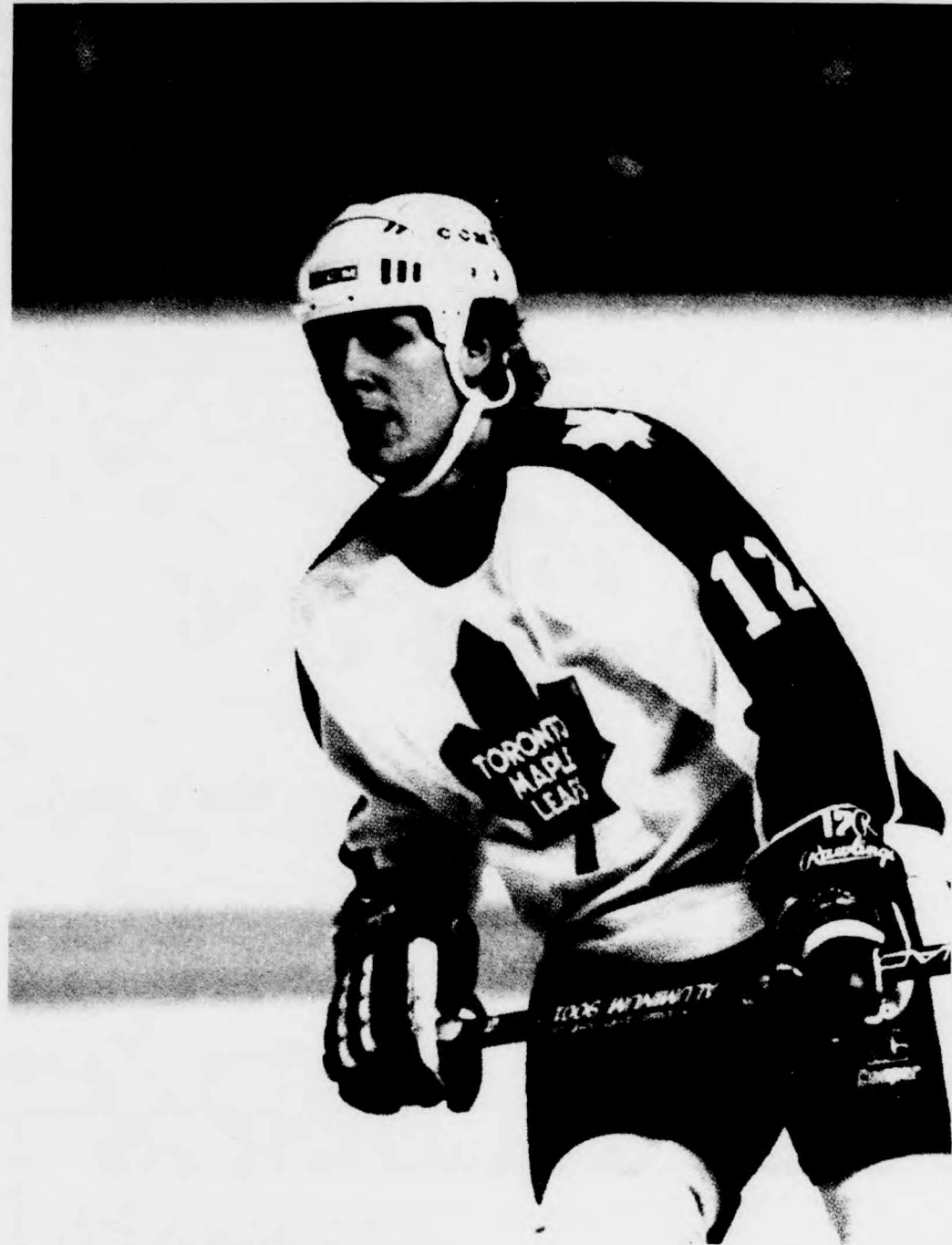
**Q.** Coming from the area, have the Leafs always been one of your favorite teams?

**A.** Oh yeah. Since I was four or five years old I wanted to play.

**Q.** Particularly for the Leafs?

**A.** Yeah, because being from Toronto you got to see them on TV all the time, you know, my dad would let me watch the first period then see you later to bed, that was all I was allowed to watch.

**Q.** Coming in a rookie, is there the com-



Leaf left-winger Steve Thomas

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*raderie on the team that you expected or anticipated?*

**A.** Yeah, everyone sticks together. You couldn't really say there were rookies on the team. Like Borje Salming's a good friend and he treats me just like a guy who's been in the league six or seven years. For someone like me, being a rookie, and having someone like him, who I've watched since I was a kid... he's an idol of mine, and for him to be my friend, that's great.



Excalibur's Dave Byrnes interviews Steve Thomas following a Leaf practice at Maple Leaf Gardens.

**Q.** Have people from your minor hockey days, friends and acquaintances from your earlier hockey years, have they moved along with you?

**A.** All my friends have stuck together but I've also noticed there've been a lot of people who I wouldn't usually talk to in high school and all of a sudden they're your best buddies. There are a lot of people who jump on the bandwagon as far as that goes. But I know my friends, I know people who would follow me and who have followed me and who I've played with, and they're my real friends. There are a lot of guys who like to hang around because I play for the Leafs or something. You know, and that's the same for any person in the limelight. But I can accept that and I know who my friends are and I know who my enemies are.

**Q.** Do you ever think about getting traded?

**A.** No. I'm just glad to be here right now. I took a long route to get here and I'm playing for a team that I've always wanted to play for. I would never want to be traded.

**Q.** What about the travelling? It must be interesting.

**A.** It's really interesting. I've seen a lot of places. Until this year I've never been over to LA or Vancouver—I've never been out West, and it's a good experience for myself, especially being young, to see these places.

**Q.** Is there a social life after a hockey game when you're on the road?

**A.** Oh yeah. The guys go out for a few beers. It's not a big deal, the guys have a few pints and go back to the room. Usually, there's an 11:00 curfew, so we can't lead too much of the bad life.