

Toronto Maple Leafs / Hockey / Sports

Leafs sensation Hyman took Berenson's advice to heart

Steve Simmons

Mar 10, 2016 • March 10, 2016 • 5 minute read



I had a chance run-in with Red Berenson, the long-time Michigan Wolverines hockey coach, late in the summer of 2013 and I asked him a question that made him frown.

“How’s Zach Hyman doing?”

At first, he just shook his head and said nothing. He really didn’t want to go into details.

Then, he said, “I think it was a mistake. Our mistake. I’m afraid he’s not of the level. I’m not sure he can help us here.”

I was curious, frankly, because I had seen Hyman play in the GTHL (AAA) and after that for Hamilton of the Ontario Junior Hockey League (Jr. A). It wasn’t like I searching for him, or anything. He happened to play on the same team as a friend’s son. Every time I went to watch my friend’s boy play, it was hard not to notice that he and Hyman were just about the best players on the ice.

Hyman scored 102 points for the Hamilton Red Wings in the season he was drafted by the Florida Panthers, then headed to Michigan where he all but disappeared. He scored six goals in his first two seasons. He was 17th on his team in scoring as a freshman. He wasn’t exactly on the fast track.

“It was a tough time for sure,” said Hyman, the newest Leaf name to know. “I was a scorer before I got there. That’s how I saw myself. I had nine points in my freshman year and nine points in my sophomore year. It was challenging to feel like you belonged.”

But something Berenson told Hyman stuck with the youngster. Even if he had no idea the famed coach had basically given up on him.

“Red said, 'If you’re not scoring, you’d better be doing something else,'” said Hyman, the power winger. “I started working on the 'something else.' Red told us lots of stories. He told us of his time in Montreal (as an afterthought with the Canadiens in the early 60s. It would be years before Berenson would become an NHL star in St. Louis).

“I never gave up. I wouldn’t let myself give up.”

Hyman never stopped believing in himself, even if others around him stopped.

He applied what he now does on the ice for the Maple Leafs — diligent work, effective work, damn difficult work — to his on-ice game, his off-ice game, to his own development: He had a goal and wouldn’t allow himself to trip over it.

And here he is, just a few days into an NHL career, and already his coach, Mike Babcock, is calling him “here to stay.”

“They’re real players,” Babcock said of Hyman and Nikita Soshnikov, the rookies who came from nowhere. “They’re gonna play. They’re just too good and too hard and too fast with too much work ethic.”



Under circumstances that are difficult to explain, Hyman, a fifth-rounder from 2010 — the same round in which John Klingberg and Petr Mrazek were chosen — couldn’t come to terms with the Panthers.

I would love to supply detail as to why the Leafs had interest in Hyman and what exactly motivated them to deal for a holdout but, under Lou Lamoriello, that information is now locked in a vault and shared with no one.

The public relations foolish Leafs aren’t smart enough to know how to spread the word on a good news story — and that’s what this is. A Forest Hill kid, a Jewish kid, a GTHL kid who grew up not far from Drake, making it with his hometown team. Against all odds.

And this is precisely what the Leafs require as part of this long-term rebuild. If the Edmonton Oilers have proven anything in their ongoing seasons of despair, it’s that you have to find players beyond the first round, beyond the obvious ways, to fill out a roster.

Soshnikov, a free agent, is one of those players. The minor-league deal for Hyman — Toronto traded Greg McKegg to the Panthers — is another.

The William Nylanders and Mitch Marners and this year’s first-round pick are the expected stars. The Sochnikovs and Hymans — they become the Andrew Shaws and Marcus Krugers a la Chicago Blackhawks, valuable surprises from outside the early rounds.

Panthers GM Dale Tallon, who did so much of the Chicago drafting, still doesn’t quite understand how he lost out on Hyman.

He drafted him, wanted to sign him out of Michigan after he was All-American his senior year, showed him a depth chart on where he would fit in organizationally as a right winger, and was surprised when he chose to ignore Florida's offer.

“We thought it was the perfect situation for him,” Tallon said in a telephone interview. “I don’t know what happened. Better ask him. We tried to sign him and he said no.”

Last June, before the NHL draft, before Lamoriello left New Jersey for Toronto, Kyle Dubas made a deal for Hyman’s rights. The deal didn’t exactly garner headlines. There’s barely a note or quote to be found with any reaction to the trade.

In his four years at Michigan, Hyman scored two, four, seven and 22 goals. He went from nobody to somebody.

“Red taught me so much,” the new Leaf said. “From work ethic to two-way play to being able to play in the defensive zone. Sheldon (Keefe) has taught me a lot from the offensive perspective — how to be patient with the puck, how not to rush plays, how to use your body and hold onto it. We’ve done a ton of video work this year. He was really important for that.”

For now, the Leafs watch and smile. Why not? They have one more player than they expected to have, maybe one more keeper.

Six years after his draft year, in his first year as a pro, Zach Hyman is turning heads.

He knew this day was coming even if nobody else did.

Email: ssimmons@postmedia.com

Twitter: [@simmonssteve](https://twitter.com/simmonssteve)