

Offsider

The most recent medical problem with Mario Lemieux, the Pittsburgh Penguins' star forward who considers himself "a positive person by nature," shocked hockey fans and followers throughout the world. An announcement was made Tuesday that Lemieux is suffering from Hodgkin's Disease -- a cancer which attacks the lymph nodes. Luck seems to be on the side of the good guys since Hodgkin's is treatable if diagnosed as early as Lemieux's was. Recurrences are uncommon. Lemieux has entered into a four-week radiation therapy program, and his prognosis is excellent. After the radiation therapy is completed, doctors will re-evaluate Lemieux periodically to ensure that all is well. He may miss up to two months of hockey and return in time for the playoffs, but the general feeling is that Lemieux will return. This latest setback is undoubtedly Lemieux's toughest medical challenge to date, but all people involved are confident that Lemieux will be on ice as the Penguin's try for a third-straight Stanley Cup.

But there is something more to be found in the whole episode. Even if Lemieux's past achievements place him amongst hockey's immortals, his battle with cancer puts him with us mortals. Most professional hockey players have an aura of infallibility surrounding them, but players like Lemieux, or New York Islanders' goaltender Marks Fitzpatrick, or Philadelphia's Tommy Soderstrom, all of whom are fighting potentially life-threatening medical problems, help us believe that hockey players are natural, not supernatural. This type of fighter is an admirable character.

Anyone wishing to send best wishes to Lemieux and the Penguins can do so by writing the following address:

Pittsburgh Penguins

Civic Arena
Pittsburgh, PA
15219
U.S.A.

It is time to talk about the Toronto Maple Leafs. They are playing good hockey; over .500 play in the tough Norris Division is not light feat. At the start of the season it looked as if Toronto would be having the same old predictable, unproductive season. Why? Because it did not seem that new coach Pat Burns' defensive coaching could fit in with Toronto's offensive style of game. But it is working. A friend of mine summed up the whole situation for me: "It takes talented players to have a good offen

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sive team; it takes a talented coach to have a good defensive team." Toronto's success can be explained that easily.

Pat Burns is undeniably an excellent coach. He has transformed the Leafs from a team that was once the butt of all hockey jokes to a team that some finally consider to have a chance in the playoffs. But face it -- any team which makes the playoffs has a chance. People should not consider the Leafs to be Stanley Cup contenders yet. Burns' style of coaching does not have a great recent success level in playoff hockey; he has not coached a team past the second round in a few years. Add on to this the fact that Norris Division playoff hockey is

tougher than other divisions (this explains why Norris teams have not won the Stanley Cup recently - they are too worn out after having finished divisional play to take it all the way).

It does not seem probable that Burns can bring the Stanley Cup to Toronto this season. Pittsburgh's having won the league championship the past two seasons demonstrates that offensive hockey is now the key to winning the Cup. The type of hockey which is put forth by Burns and his Leafs can win games, but it is not particularly conducive to winning championships. It is possible that, in years to come, Burns will be able to reconcile his defensive coaching with the team's natural offensive orientation to create a strong Stanley Cup contender. But it is not likely to happen this season.

Panther rookie Mike Tilley has left the Panthers and will play with the Charlottetown Abbies for the remainder of the season. The CIAU rule allows a CIAU player to return to this team the following season if he has left the team before January 15. Tilley opted for the Abbies because playing there will give him more games after his return from New Zealand.

The Panthers were away last week. Both of their games were decided by one goal, and the Panthers came home with one more win. Friday night, St. Thomas forward Mark Rupnow scored twenty-three seconds into overtime to end the game in a 5-4 Tommies' win. Saturday the Panthers played in Moncton and won 3-2 off Jeff Gallant's goal late in the third period. The Panthers' record now stands at 4-10-4.

Try one or both of the Panthers' home games this weekend at the Civic Center. Saturday night the U.C.C.B Capers will play the Panthers at 7:00 and Sunday afternoon the Panther/Moncton Blue Eagle Rivalry continues at 2:00. Sunday's game looks like a good one. ●

