



SPORTS

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ARM WRESTLING



R.J. JOHNSTON/TORONTO STAR

Fourteen-year-old Iti Manchanda, left, the youngest competitor at a Team Arm Wrestling Federation event in October, has been dubbed the "silent assassin."

GOING OUT ON A LIMB

Arm wrestling league looks to elevate niche sport to the mainstream: 'It's very primal'

KERRY GILLESPIE
SPORTS REPORTER

The biceps bulging out of Toronto Smoke and Montreal Saints jerseys were impressive at the inaugural showcase of the world's first professional team-based arm wrestling league.

But it's the forearms, wrists and hands that competitors in this sport focus on. So much so, that a handshake between arm wrestlers is a performance.

Too much information — size, bone structure, weaknesses,

strengths — can be given away in a handshake, explains Team Arm Wrestling Federation co-founder Jason Costantini. So it's the opposite of the crushing grip one might expect of such athletes.

"It's completely limp," Costantini says, "They give you no force in their handshake. It's a psychological thing because they don't want to give you any information."

Arm wrestling pulled Costantini out of a dark place after treatment for cancer and he is determined to pay that back. He has launched a professional, team-based league in

North America with a broadcast-friendly format and team dynamics for fans to get behind that he thinks can elevate this niche fight sport to the mainstream.

For the first pre-season event last month at Toronto's Henderson Brewing Co, he tapped TSN's Matt Cauz, a newcomer to the sport, for play-by-play and Auden Larratt, the son of sport legend Devon Larratt, to provide expertise for the broadcast. The pairing was a purposeful departure from the inside talk that dominates pay-per-view professional matches and was de-

signed to educate new audiences.

Cauz says the sport works on a couple of levels for sports fans.

"It's very primal," he says, comparing it to the 100-metre sprint except it's about who is the strongest, not the fastest. "Then you start to learn about the hand placement, top roll or press versus hook and there's actually a lot of strategy."

Arm wrestling's core moves are top roll, hook and press and, when strength is comparable, it's like a rock-paper-scissors contest where each move has a counter move that

“
It's not just strength. You need to pick your opponent apart.

AUDEN LARRATT
BROADCASTER

SEE ARM WRESTLING, S4

MAPLE LEAFS

Direction is needed and south isn't an option

Head coach Berube says players have lost their confidence and need to fight to get it back



DAVE FESCHUK
OPINION

Craig Berube's vision of hockey demands the puck go one direction. You know the one.

"North" is among the coach's favourite words. A mere five weeks into the six-month slog that is the NHL season, the Maple Leafs head coach has been tasked with figuring out why his team has gone south.

In some ways, it's too early to get alarmed. The Leafs head into Saturday night's game in Chicago, their 19th of the season, sporting a .500 points percentage and they are just two points out of a playoff spot. In a parity-rich NHL, it's not as though

they've dug some unescapable hole.

The problem is the Leafs have been gifted a relatively favourable schedule to date, and the key stats are getting ugly.

They're the worst defensive team in the league at 3.84 goals against per game, more than a goal a game worse than they were a season ago under Berube. They've lost four straight games for the first time in Berube's tenure. And at least a couple of recent results, Thursday's 4-3 overtime loss to the Kings and Sunday's 5-4 loss to the Hurricanes, have seen the ice tilted to the whim of Toronto's opponents to alarming extremes.

Sure, both were one-goal games. But in those two games combined the Leafs were outshot 84-35. When the other team is command-



NATHAN DENETTE/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Thursday's overtime loss to the Kings was the Leafs' fourth straight defeat, the first time that has happened in the Craig Berube era.

ing more than 70 per cent of the shots-on-goal share, even the best goaltending in the world will be tested.

The Leafs don't have anything close to that so far this season, coming into Friday with an .877 team

SEE FESCHUK, S4

MATTHEWS PUT ON IR

The Maple Leafs placed captain Auston Matthews on injured reserve with a lower-body injury Friday, retroactive to Tuesday. The Leafs also activated goaltender Joseph Woll and recalled forward Easton Cowan from the AHL's Marlies.

THE CANADIAN PRESS



Fresh Woll could be the spark Leafs need

OPINION: FESCHUK FROM 51

save percentage that ranked 26th in the NHL.

Friday brought news that has a chance to change that picture for the better. The Leafs announced that goaltender Joseph Woll, who has yet to play this season on account of a personal leave of absence, had been activated. About three weeks since he returned to the team, and after putting up an .885 save percentage in two conditioning starts with the Marlies, it's possible Woll will play as early as Saturday, although Berube said the starter in Chicago is yet to be determined.

"I feel great," Woll said. "I'm ready to go when I'm needed."

The Leafs could no doubt use the help from Woll and his .910 career save percentage. No. 1 goalie Anthony Stolarz, already showing signs of wear while on pace for a career-high workload, is day to day with an undisclosed injury. No. 3 Dennis Hildeby, he of the 10 career NHL games, has played in four games in a six-day stretch.

"It's been a bit of a weird start to the season," Woll said. "I'm just pumped to get going."

Lately "pumped" is what the Leafs have been getting, with Toronto's defensive corps appearing to struggle to move the puck up ice and Toronto's forwards not looking like much help in the bungled process.

"It's a little bit too many mistakes that end up in our own net," said Oliver Ekman-Larsson, the veteran defenceman. "Everybody sees that."

Ekman-Larsson chalked it up to indecision, saying the Leafs often seem unsure of the right play. Should it be a tape-to-tape pass or a chip off the glass and out of the zone? Make a play or punt and live to fight another day?

"I think we struggle with (that decision), when to make a pass on the tape and when to get the puck out," Ekman-Larsson said. "We've had the puck on the stick when we can clear it, and then you'll see it bounce, and then you squeeze the stick a little bit too tight. That's what I see, and I think we're in agreement through the whole team."

Berube said the Leafs are facing an early-season crisis of confidence. Confidence in what, he didn't say. In themselves? In the coach's system?

The coach said he was sure of one thing: "You want to get your confidence back, you go and work to get it back. That's how you get your confidence back. Yeah, we're in adversity. Well, what are we going to do? We're going to go through that adversity, go through that wall, find a way to get through it, climb over the wall. Whatever it is. You've got to push your way through it as a team and every individual."

The surest way to stop this season from going further south, in other words, is to go north, only with renewed belief and more force.

"We all believe in it. We all know we can do it. It's just a matter of getting that swagger back," Ekman-Larsson said. "We have been scoring a lot of goals (fourth most in the league per game, heading into Friday). That's not the issue. So we've been making some good plays with the puck, I'm not taking that away. But it's critical plays at critical times — that's what we have to figure out."

Few in sport earn a living

ARM WRESTLING FROM 51

beats it. "It's not just strength," Larratt says. "You need to pick your opponent apart." And when athletes compete multiple times in short succession, fans also "see who has put in the most work."

On the women's side, that might be Toronto lightweight Iti Manchanda, the youngest competitor at 14 years of age and dubbed the "silent assassin."

She's had a meteoric rise through the sport in a year and a half, picking up provincial and national titles and silver at the world championships in Bulgaria last month. She won her first two matches against Montreal's Kyrie Kohoko in seconds but let the third match go on longer.

"She could finish anytime she wants," Larratt says, noting the "total domination" of her left arm holding still on the table. Was she trying to draw her opponent into a foul to pick up more points for the team, he wondered aloud.

Manchanda: "I knew I was stronger than her today so I was letting her have a chance, I didn't want her to, you know, not feel good."

"I trained extremely hard for this match, for two months I was working out five to six hours a day. I was hoping to dominate this match, which I thankfully could do, so I'm really grateful for this opportunity." At the amateur level, this sport features tournament-style events with age and weight classes for women but the professional side is heavily male dominated. Even then, only a handful of men are able to make a living off their name recognition.

The Team Arm Wrestling Federation has more men on its eight



Canadian and American teams and they get more matches and a different format but Costantini says it was important to include a women's division to grow the sport for everyone.

The pro level "gravitates to the biggest and the baddest and that's what they want to show you ... but you don't need the two biggest, strongest people to have a good arm wrestling match," he says.

The Toronto Smoke women won every match at the Oct. 11 showcase. But in a scenario that will feel a little too familiar to long-suffering Toronto sports fans, the men's team got off to a great start but couldn't close it out and fell to the Montreal Saints.

Next up, the Vancouver Wildcats face the Calgary Rangers in February. The final two showcase events, next spring and summer, feature the American teams — Long Island Raiders vs. Detroit Steel and Tampa

Above, manager and two-time world champion Mikel Gould's arm with the Smoke logo.

Top: Bryce Zachariah competes at a Team Arm Wrestling Federation event last month.

R.J. JOHNSTON PHOTOS/TORONTO STAR

GOLF

Hadwin leads by one in Bermuda

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SOUTHAMPTON, BERMUDA Adam Hadwin held onto the lead Friday in the windy Butterfield Bermuda Championship in a late bid to retain full PGA Tour playing privileges, shooting a 5-under 66 at Port Royal to take a one-shot advantage into the weekend.

Hadwin is 147th in the FedEx Cup standings, with the top 100 next week after the RSM Classic keeping their tour cards for next year. The 38-year-old Canadian, a PGA Tour winner and two-time Presidents Cup player, missed the FedEx Cup playoffs for the first time in his tour career.

Hadwin had an 11-under 131 total after opening with a 65 on Thursday.

"A little bit more scramble than yesterday, didn't quite hit it as well," Hadwin said. "A little off early ... Just a little off. Didn't quite have the same feel as I did yesterday, but scrambled really well. Short game, putting, made a bunch of putts today."

Chandler Phillips (64) and Braden Thornberry (65) were tied for second. Max McGreevey (64) and Noah Goodwin (67) were 3 under. Six players were unable to finish

before dark.

With wind gusting to 26 miles per hour, Hadwin rebounded from a double bogey on the par-3 13th — his fourth hole of the day — with an eagle from the rough on the short par-4 sixth.

"I thought just push it up there and get within 50, 60 yards of the green and just kind of pitch back up to that pin," Hadwin said. "I thought as long as you keep it right of the bushes, you're kind of got 50, 60 yards to work with. It came off perfectly, the pitch shot did. You're a little bit lucky to kind of make it, but I did exactly what I wanted to do."

Hadwin is making his 299th PGA Tour start. He won the 2017 Valpar Championship for his lone PGA Tour title.

Grant, Kim lead The Annika

Linn Grant shot a 7-under 63 on Friday for a share of the lead with Grace Kim at The Annika in Belleair, Fla. Kim had a 66 to join Grant at 9-under 131 at Pelican Golf Club.

"Very, very solid. I hit some really good shots," said Grant, the Swede who won the 2023 Dana Open for her lone LPGA Tour title.

"Tee to green today was very good. I felt like I played similar yesterday



Adam Hadwin, ranked 147th, needs to jump into the top 100 to keep his PGA Tour card.

but I just couldn't get the putts to go in, and today a lot of them went in."

First-round leader Haeran Ryu followed her opening 64 with a 68 to drop into a tie for third with Jennifer Kupcho (66) at 8 under.

Defending champion Nelly Korda made a big move with a 63 of her own, finishing with three birdies to get to three off the lead. Canadian Brooke Henderson was another two shots back after a 66.

Korda won the tournament last year to become the first player in 13 years to win seven times in a season. She has yet to win this year.

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