

DeMar DeRozan, Amir Johnson savour moment as Raptors clinch first playoff appearance since 2007-08

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TORONTO – DeMar DeRozan and Amir Johnson have a better idea than anyone about what it's been like to play for the Toronto Raptors. Together, they've been in game after game as the franchise continuously failed to distance itself from the self-burdened expectation of losing basketball. Together, DeRozan and Johnson helped change that this season.

The deafening roar from the Air Canada Centre crowd as the buzzer sounded Friday night was the confirmation of that change. A missed jump shot by Celtics forward Jared Sullinger ensured the inevitable: the Raptors will return to the playoffs for the first time since 2007-08, as they held on for a 105-103 win over Boston and officially ended the longest playoff drought in the Eastern Conference.

Those six years in between postseason berths for Toronto were far from pretty. DeRozan and Johnson, the two longest-tenured Raptors, have been there for five of them. Clinching a playoff spot is the high point in their careers to date.

"It just sums up everything these past four seasons that we've been through, that it was all worth it," said DeRozan. "Especially for me and Amir and what we've been through here with the tough seasons, through the ups and downs and the struggles. We stuck with it."

Johnson has tasted the playoffs before, playing limited minutes for the Pistons as the team aged and faded from their contending past, but it's in Toronto where he's established his NBA credentials and become a fan favourite.

"It's a satisfying, kind of overwhelming feeling," said Johnson. "It's been six years since this team, this organization made it to the playoffs. This team has worked so hard. We deserved it."

For two Los Angeles natives who grew up watching the Lakers reach the postseason year after year, they know how much it means to those who cheer them on.

"It was definitely cool to get it in front of the home fans and see the reaction that they gave us." said DeRozan. "Since I've been here the fans have definitely been loyal, stuck by us through the tough times. You can't ask for better fans than that. These fans have been here from the start and to see it turn around and share it with our fans is cool."

The Celtics made them earn it, too. Boston rallied from down double digits in the fourth quarter to make a game of it. With the game tied at 101 with just over 30 seconds left, DeRozan hit a difficult jump shot in the lane to give the Raptors a two point lead. After the Celtics responded on their next offensive possession, Kyle Lowry crashed towards the hoop and missed a layup, but Johnson swooped in right behind him and scored the game-winning bucket on the rebound.

"It was fitting for those two guys because they've been through thick and thin, through good times and bad times," said head coach Dwane Casey.

The win took on a different personal significance for Casey. It was about getting back to a place he had grown to accept as a given after 20 years in the league, but a place he had never been to in his brief time as a head coach.

"It seems like old hat for me, as far as going there a lot [as an assistant coach] in Seattle and Dallas, you kind of take it for granted," Casey said.

With 10 games left and a 2.5 game lead, the Raptors' next mission is to hold off Brooklyn for the Atlantic Division title and clinch home court advantage in the first round.

The forthcoming challenges will be much tougher than a home game against the Celtics, and even there the Raptors had obstacles to overcome. Lowry left the game late in the second quarter with an ankle injury. He was back on the floor to start the third quarter but wasn't his usual dynamic self for most of the second half.

It was better against Boston but their bench play has struggled without [Patrick Patterson](#), who is on the mend and could return for Sunday's game in Orlando.

"We can't be satisfied," said Casey. "We have to get better. We've got to understand how to play against physicality and continue that focus in the heat of moment, and there's going to be a lot of [those] moments these last 10 [games] and once we get into the playoffs."

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