

# Dwane Casey keeps pushing Raptors in constant search for identity

 [ca.sports.yahoo.com/blogs/eh-game/dwane-casey-keeps-pushing-raptors-in-constant-search-for-identity-235351706.html](http://ca.sports.yahoo.com/blogs/eh-game/dwane-casey-keeps-pushing-raptors-in-constant-search-for-identity-235351706.html)

By Israel Fehr



6 April, 2016 11:00 AM [Eh Game](#)

TORONTO – Barring something short of an unforeseen diabolical mathematical riddle we have yet to consider, the Raptors will play at home over the opening weekend of the playoffs as the No. 2 seed in the Eastern Conference.

It's a great place to be, to be sure, the best place the Raptors have been in the 21 years they've been an NBA franchise, but it does present head coach Dwane Casey and his coaching staff an interesting challenge entering the final week of the regular season.

The mind is prone to wander when there isn't much left in terms to play for, and the eyes will certainly be turned toward the out-of-town scoreboard to see who they might face in the first round.

Casey says the schedule has kept his team in check, referring to tough road games over the weekend in Memphis and San Antonio, Tuesday night's [96-90 win](#) over Charlotte and upcoming games with Atlanta and Indiana, though that won't be the case with games against the Knicks, Sixers, and Nets to close out the season.

Don't be surprised if Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan are rested in one or even two of those final three games while the public stance from the Raptors is that DeMarre Carroll will return at some point this season, though they're still not saying when. Regardless of what ends up happening in either case, the playoffs will be here very soon.

"Our guys have been through this before. They've been to the playoffs before now. They understand what time of year it is," said Casey. "One thing we have to do now is try some things in the game – different looks, different sets, different plays – to try to work on that now as opposed to try and wait until practice because there's so little practice time."

Introducing new wrinkles in the playbook isn't the only method Casey is using to keep his players engaged over a 48-minute game that is for the most part meaningless in terms of immediate impact. Casey is constantly reminding his team to keep their mind on the big picture and their eyes toward the future.

"I think they're very focused. We're not going to go out there and overpower anybody. We've got to go out and play with a certain way and identity. That's been since day one. If you do that you don't have to worry about guys staying focused or playing to your identity at this time of year," said Casey.

"I think we're taking steps of getting there. We're not there yet. Playing a certain style of play each and every night where you don't have to worry of having this emotional rollercoaster. We're still trying to get to that level where you can expect a certain style of play every night."

What Casey is describing is what has separated the Spurs from the pack for almost two decades. It's how they still win games when Gregg Popovich rests his All-Stars and puts out a lineup filled with reserves. Whether Tim Duncan or Matt Bonner is out there, San Antonio plays the same way to great success.

There's no better current example of that with the Raptors than Norman Powell. The rookie swingman has been Toronto's primary starting small forward since the beginning of February and his game has flourished in an incredibly

short period of time. Over his last 12 games, Powell is averaging 10.8 points, 3.8 rebounds, and 1.7 assists over almost 27 minutes.

For a coach like Casey, who has a tendency to roll with his veterans over rookies, sophomores, or even third-year players, the trust he's placed in Powell speaks volumes. Furthermore, Casey is convinced that fellow young players Lucas Nogueira and Delon Wright would have also thrived under similar circumstances.



"I tell you what, [Powell] has really impressed me. He's grown ... There was an opportunity and he took advantage of it with DeMarre being out. He grabbed it, held on to it, he's made his mistakes and learned but he's a great student," said Casey. "It was an opportunity at that position. I'm sure if we had opportunities at the centre position Lucas would have stepped in or at the point guard position Delon would have stepped in."

What fuels Casey's conviction? Because the message of what's expected of each and every player is delivered loud and clear from the moment a new player joins the organization.

"We want to be a tough, hard-nosed defensive team," said Powell, who was the Raptors' second-round pick in the 2015 draft. "That's something coach Casey told me on my first day when I was here for my draft workout. That's what I really picked up from training camp and really throughout the season. It's where we're all anticipating, we're all talking, we're all on a string and guys are trusting one another that they're going to be there for help side defence. The energy that I bring on the defensive side is going to fuel my offence. I think the team knows that. It's all about working together."

The final week of the regular season may not affect where Toronto finishes in the standings or who they match up with in round one, but it is wholly important as part of their long-term identity building plan.

-----

**Israel Fehr** is a writer for [Yahoo Canada Sports](#). Email him at [israelfehr@yahoo.ca](mailto:israelfehr@yahoo.ca) or follow him on Twitter. [Follow @israelfehr](#)