

Kobe Bryant farewell tour hits Toronto, Raptors pull away from Lakers late

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By Israel Fehr

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TORONTO – In good times and bad, you could always count on Kobe Bryant to put on a show. Sure, some of that was a product of the franchise he plays for and the city it represents, but the Los Angeles Lakers superstar and surefire first-ballot Hall of Famer was a natural in the spotlight.

So after announcing he would be retiring at the conclusion of the 2015-16 season, making Monday's visit to the Air Canada Centre his last one with the Lakers, it was a given that the 37-year-old would be the centre of attention.

The Toronto crowd, dotted with purple and gold Bryant uniforms of old (No. 8) and new (No. 24) vintage, greeted him with a loud ovation when the Lakers' starting lineup was announced. Near the end of the first quarter, a video tribute to Bryant played on the big screen. The fans cheered again and Bryant acknowledged them, tapping his heart and pointing to the stands. When he was subbed out for the final time with 24 seconds to go, the crowd responded with another mighty roar.

"Wow. It felt absolutely amazing," Bryant said in disbelief in a jammed-packed postgame press conference.

Then he added with a chuckle, "I was sitting on the bench and they started chanting 'We want Kobe!' a little too early. I was like 'Dude, hold on. Give me five minutes!'"

That's right, on a night that was all about a legend leaving the game, there was still a game to play.

There was even a stretch in the fourth quarter where the Kobe of 10 years ago made a short-lived resurgence. He canned three consecutive shots, engendering the faintest bit of belief that he was about to close the game like he always used to do. Then reality set in: an airball three was followed by a fadeaway baseline jumper while facing a double-team that missed badly. From there the Raptors pulled away for a [102-93 win](#). Bryant finished with 21 points

on 8-of-16 shooting. These days, that qualifies as a darn good game from Kobe. He came into Monday's contest shooting less than 30% from the field.

It's really what makes this whole farewell tour bizarre. The loss dropped the Lakers to 3-18, and for a player who is above all recognized and celebrated for his drive to win, this farewell feels somewhat hollow. Bryant's legacy is complicated, to say the least, as it is: beloved by many and reviled by the rest, with little room for indifference. There are the five championships, the 17 All-Star game appearances, and the 32,753 points and counting, third most in NBA history. But there were always criticisms of Bryant as a player: he shot too much, he was a difficult teammate, and that made him a polarizing figure.

"I played with a chip on my shoulder," said Bryant. "I didn't care who was out there in front of me, my job was to try to make your night absolutely miserable. I came out there to destroy you. It's not a very likable characteristic to have, but I found comfort in it. It's not so much the fact that people didn't like it, it's the fact that I liked the fact that they didn't like it.

"With me as a young kid, I was very bullheaded and ultra-aggressive and just wanted to win," he added. "That's a double-edged sword, right? It can cut both ways."

Those characteristics Bryant describes make some sense of the following. The decline of a superstar is always jarring. The drop-off from great to grim is sudden and without consequence. With Bryant, though, we could see it coming. The same traits that made him great – his dogged determination and downright defiant attitude – were sure to double as the cause for his downfall.

The player who [scored 81 points in a game against the Raptors in 2006](#) is gone. The toll of surgeries to repair a ruptured left Achilles tendon, a left knee fracture, and a torn right rotator cuff all in the last 30 months, have rendered his body a physical mess.

With Bryant as the focal point one last time, though, the show Monday in Toronto was compelling, even if this time the result was more predictable than it was in the past. Players and fans alike were there to appreciate him for what he was and what he is, for better or worse.

It seems like there's a player on every team in the NBA today that grew up in Southern California wanting to play like Bryant – the Raptors have two in DeMar DeRozan and Norman Powell – and in that respect his impact on the game is undisputed.

"It's a sad day," said DeRozan. "It's a little bit of everything just to see him walking away from the game, especially someone I idolized and grew up watching. I'm honoured to have the opportunity to just compete against him. When I'm old I can add in stories that I played against Kobe, like a lot of older guys do about Michael Jordan."

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