

Vancouver brings 'playoff' atmosphere to Raptors preseason win over Kings

ca.sports.yahoo.com/blogs/eh-game/vancouver-brings--playoff--atmosphere-to-raptors-preseason-win-over-kings-121854655.html

By Israel Fehr

10/6/2014



VANCOUVER – The Grizzlies may have been ripped away over a decade ago, but it's clear that Vancouver's basketball heart is still beating – loudly.

The sold-out crowd for Sunday's preseason opener between the Toronto Raptors and Sacramento Kings at Rogers Arena was infinitely louder and more invested than the one that had occupied those same seats at the Canucks game Saturday night.

From the moment the players took the floor for pregame warmup the fans, who wore an eclectic mix of basketball jerseys which included more than a few vintage Grizzlies uniforms, brought the noise and didn't stop bringing it until the final whistle.

"I was on the bench with Amir [Johnson] and he said 'this is crazy, it sounds like a playoff game' and it really did. The energy in here tonight for a preseason game was definitely amazing and we're very appreciative of it because we are Canada's team," said DeMar DeRozan, who scored a game-high 21 points in Toronto's [99-94 win](#).

It's been over 13 years since the Grizzlies played their final game in Vancouver before jetting off for Memphis and just less than four years since Steve Nash and the Phoenix Suns played the last of three exhibitions they brought to Nash's home province.

When Kings rookie and Mississauga, Ont., native Nik Stauskas made his NBA debut late in the first quarter he was [greeted](#) with a round of applause, but it was obvious that a vast majority of the 18,630 in attendance were cheering

for the Raptors.

"It felt like we were back in Toronto," said Raptors head coach Dwane Casey. "I'm really impressed with the pride and we're happy to be a part of that. Masai said it, we're excited about sharing Raptor basketball around the country. Hopefully we can come back here again or somewhere else in Canada. I think it's great for guys to see that our games are televised here in Vancouver and it's good overall for the Raptor brand and our organization."

Armed with their "We The North" [campaign](#), the Raptors made the trip west looking to bring more people on board and Vancouver certainly knows when to jump on a bandwagon. The city's [allegiance](#) to the Seattle Seahawks has never been stronger coming off the team's Super Bowl victory.

Toronto has a young and exciting team that appears poised to be competitive and continue getting better for years to come. If Sunday was any indication, many in Vancouver are starting to feel the same way about the Raptors as they do the Seahawks.

With professional basketball, though, there will always be the sense of what could have been after the Grizzlies experiment was aborted after six short years. It's a failure that former NBA commissioner David Stern identifies as the deepest regret he has from over 30 years in charge of the league.

Canucks owner Francesco Aquilini, who watched the game from courtside seats next to MLSE chairman Larry Tanenbaum, has been linked with numerous NBA teams in the past but right now the reality is that bringing a franchise to Vancouver, either by relocation or expansion, is far down the league's list of priorities.

The NBA's bandwagon rode through Rogers Arena for the first time in almost four years and even if it was just for one night, the city showed its passion for basketball persists.

"I've always said that [Vancouver should have an NBA franchise]," Casey [told](#) the Canadian Press. "Vancouver and Seattle both, you're preaching to the choir with that because I think it's a great basketball city."

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