

Work-in-progress Raptors rally in second half to beat Pacers in season opener

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By Israel Fehr

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TORONTO – The Raptors learned it the hard way last season: it's not how you start; it's how you finish.

That mantra certainly proved true Wednesday night, as Toronto rallied in the second half to beat the Indiana Pacers 106-99 and open the 2015-16 NBA regular season with a home win.

It took less than 12 minutes for the joyous fanfare from the prolonged pregame ceremony at the Air Canada Centre celebrating the return of real basketball to evaporate.

Frustration with the Raptors' stagnant offence – a lack of ball movement and spacing was supposed to be a thing of the past – gave way to fear when prized free agent signing DeMarre Carroll went to the locker room near the end of the first quarter holding his left arm after falling to the floor awkwardly on a drive to the basket. After being checked out by team doctors, it was announced Carroll sustained an elbow contusion and would be able to continue playing.

The second quarter went slightly better for Toronto, as Carroll returned quickly and played a big part in holding the Pacers to 15 points, but the offence was still ineffective and the Raptors trailed Indiana 45-37 at halftime. Outside of Carroll suffering a more serious injury – the 29-year-old forward initially thought he'd broken his elbow – the Raptors could not have gotten off to a worse start.

"It felt tough," said DeMar DeRozan, "but the coaches got on us at halftime and we definitely picked it up."

"We came out a little nervous and we couldn't hit a shot," added Carroll, who played a game-high 41 minutes despite the early scare with his elbow.

Carroll's honest assessment brings us to another favourite mantra regularly used by NBA coaches and players: it's a

make-or-miss league. The Raptors did a whole lot of the latter in the first half – shooting a woeful 37% from the field, 25% from three, and 47% from the free-throw line – and much more of the former over the final 24 minutes, converting 52% of their attempts from the floor, 50% of their threes, and 83% of their free throws and outscored Indiana by 15 points over the final two quarters.

When the shots are falling, the positives shine through. Kyle Lowry weaved through the Indiana defence for layups on multiple occasions in the second half on his way to 23 points. Jonas Valanciunas scored 21 points, grabbed 15 rebounds, and – gasp – even played meaningful minutes in the fourth quarter. Patrick Patterson, who struggled with his shot in preseason, had eight points and hit two threes in 19 minutes off the bench. Carroll hounded Paul George for much of the night, limiting the Pacers star to 17 points on 4-for-17 shooting from the field. DeRozan led all scorers with 25 points and saved his best for last, coming up with a couple crucial baskets in the final minutes when the game was close that he followed up with a defiant snarl.

"That's the kind of force we have to play with in the first half, at the start of the game," said head coach Dwane Casey. "I was pleased with our defence, we got stops when we needed to but again we've got to play with force and physicality to start the game."

"The game was up-and-down," said Valanciunas. "We played together. We know that we have a lot of areas to fix but at the end of the day we got a win."

It wasn't always pretty, but earning that win was the first step for the Raptors to distance themselves from the indignity of being swept by the Washington Wizards in the first round of the playoffs last season after winning a franchise-record 49 games.

"We keep talking about last year. Last year is in the rearview mirror. We're facing this year now. We haven't done anything this season. We've got to earn our way back to where we were last year, in the playoffs and beyond. That's what we're out trying to do now. Last year motivates you," Casey said before the game. "It's disappointing. It hurts. Believe me, it hurts. But we can't live our life thinking about last year. This is a new team. I'm more excited and nervous about how this group is coming together more so than what happened last year."

So here they go again, with a few new characters in Carroll, Cory Joseph, and Luis Scola joining the familiar faces in Toronto. Game No. 1 of 82 validated both the emotions Casey felt going in. The comeback will help quell the concerns raised in the first half, but it's clear at this stage that they're far from a finished product. And that's OK. Because it's not about how you start. It's about how you finish.

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