

Bautista, Encarnacion show once again why they're Toronto's kings

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By Israel Fehr

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TORONTO – For years there was no question the Toronto Blue Jays belonged to Jose Bautista and Edwin Encarnacion. Year after year there was a certain familiar tinge to it, too: Bautista and Encarnacion made All-Star teams and their real team missed the playoffs. Rinse and repeat, for half a decade in Bautista's case.

If there's such a thing as a sports tragedy, it's watching a team waste the prime years of truly great players. Bautista and Encarnacion appeared to be headed down that path in Toronto. They were the two late bloomers who had come to the Blue Jays and emerged as two of the game's most feared hitters. Regardless of the team's results, they were beloved.

What's to come, however, is uncertain, as they both head into free agency at season's end, but for at least one more night, these Blue Jays still belonged to Bautista and Encarnacion.

Playing inside a packed Rogers Centre on Tuesday night in the American League wild-card game against the Baltimore Orioles, Bautista put the Blue Jays on the board with a solo home run in the second inning. It was Encarnacion who ended it, crushing a ball to left field in the bottom of the 11th off Ubaldo Jimenez for a three-run walk-off shot to lift Toronto to a [5-2 win](#).

When Bautista cemented his legacy with his bat flip home run in Game 5 of last year's ALDS, not a single Blue Jays player was surprised to see him rise to the occasion. Encarnacion's heroics drew a similar reaction from teammates.

"I've watched him hit a lot of home runs these last couple years," said Devon Travis, who was on third base. "Most of the time you can just look at his reaction and he knows when he's got it."

"He's one of the smartest hitters I've ever been around," said Marcus Stroman, who started the game and pitched six innings, allowing two runs. "He's able to pick things up on pitchers. He's able to sit on a pitch in certain [at-bats] and he won't miss it. To see how he goes about his business day to day and to see the work that goes into it, it's truly incredible, and it shows out on the field."



But for a long time, all that work didn't amount to enough winning. Bautista carried the dubious title of being the [best player in the majors to have never played in a playoff game](#). It was a title he was especially desperate to shed. So much so that he wasn't above clamoring for help. Baseball is, after all, a team game.

There was the reported payment deferral, where five veterans, including Bautista and Encarnacion, [agreed to defer salary to later in their contracts](#) in an effort to sign pitcher Ervin Santana before the 2014 season. Santana ended up signing a one-year deal with the Braves. A few months later, with the Blue Jays still in the mix for a playoff spot, Bautista was [disappointed the front office stood pat](#) at the trade deadline. Toronto faded down the stretch and once again missed the postseason. The tick tock you heard was on Bautista and Encarnacion's prime years.

The turnaround began when former general manager Alex Anthopoulos swung offseason deals for Josh Donaldson and Russell Martin heading into the 2015 season. The Blue Jays showed signs of being a power in the first half, but still needed a spark, so Anthopoulos doubled down, making trades for Troy Tulowitzki and David Price before the deadline. The team took off after that, reaching the ALCS where they lost the eventual World Series champion Royals.

This season hasn't gone quite as swimmingly – as evidence by their presence in the wild-card game – perhaps in part because of the uncertainty that surrounds Bautista and Encarnacion. The status of their negotiations has been a story since the Blue Jays opened spring training.

Bautista met with reporters on the first official day of camp and stated he had let the organization know what his demands were and they would either meet them or else. Encarnacion spoke the next day and took a different tact, saying the only number he would talk about publicly was his RBI total.

When the subject came up again before Tuesday's game, Bautista grinned and delivered a great line: "Let's not make it the last game, how about that?"

The feeling around Toronto was then, and still is, that they are both on their way out when the offseason comes

around. They'll be too expensive; it's not worth it, or intelligent, at their age – Bautista will be 36 and Encarnacion 34 next season – to commit to them long term. But before the hot stove arrives and completely swallows everything around them, here they are again, a place that seemed frustratingly out of reach at times in the past, heading into an ALDS a rematch with the Texas Rangers.

“We knew what was on the horizon,” said Bautista. “We’ve just got to keep our emotions in check, go down there and win some ballgames and play good baseball. That’s what we’re capable of doing. That’s what we tried to do last year, that’s what we did this year.”

There will be stories there, too, beyond the playing future of Toronto’s soon-to-be free agent sluggers. The last time the Blue Jays and Rangers tangled in Texas, Rowned Odor [punched Bautista square in the jaw](#), twisted retribution in a drama that dates back to the iconic (or infamous) bat flip. In Bautista’s view, the stakes are too high to circle back to that kind of nonsense.

“We’ve got a series to win. I’m focused on playing baseball,” said Bautista.

There’s nothing Bautista would like to be able to do more than to say that a couple more times this month. A few more moments from him and Encarnacion like in the wild-card game would go a long way in making it happen. And no matter what happens, those moments like Bautista’s bat flip and Encarnacion’s walk-off, will be cherished in Toronto forever.

Israel Fehr is a writer for [Big League Stew](#) on Yahoo Sports. Have a tip? Email him at israelfehr@yahoo.ca or follow him on Twitter.