

Blue Jays' defeat in ALCS may signal end of an era in Toronto

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By Israel Fehr

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TORONTO – Jose Bautista ripped a ball to left field and the crowd at the Rogers Centre roared, reaching a crescendo as Bautista arrived at second base standing up to lead off the bottom of the ninth inning.

This was it. This Toronto Blue Jays team that rose to prominence after years of mediocrity on the strength of a loaded lineup was finally going to break through and the player whose breakout gave the team its first building block years ago was getting the rally started.

Not to be. Josh Donaldson and Edwin Encarnacion struck out swinging and Troy Tulowitzki's pop up was caught by first baseman Carlos Santana in foul territory for the final out of the inning, the game, and in Toronto's case, the season. Cleveland's players spilled out of the dugout and rushed toward the mound, celebrating a 3-0 win in Game 5 of the ALCS on Wednesday that clinched their spot in the World Series. The Jays were left to slowly walk back to the clubhouse and begin cleaning out their lockers.

The circumstances of this loss will sting, maybe even more than the Game 3 defeat where Cleveland's bullpen recorded 25 of the 27 outs. Ryan Merritt, with 11 career innings in the majors, blanked the Blue Jays over 4 1/3 innings and the stellar relief trio of Bryan Shaw, Andrew Miller and Cody Allen combined to keep it that way.

Bautista had said after Game 4 that Merritt might be "shaking in his boots" at the prospect of facing Toronto's powerful lineup. Instead, Cleveland's rookie left-hander was one of the pitchers who used his metaphorical boots to administer a swift kick to the Blue Jays' behinds, right out of the playoffs.

"There's never any disrespect and I would never try to take credit away from the opponent. They played great and beat us tonight," said Bautista. "They pitched great. It was tough. They seemed to make the right pitches at the right time and got us out.

"It's disappointing. Getting so close and not being able to win, that's disappointing. As a player when you feel like you have a chance and as team you can get it done and you don't accomplish that, it is disappointing."



Marco Estrada had trouble grasping that the run was over. He pitched six innings, giving up three runs. A fine performance by most standards, but not quite enough in a scenario where the Jays scored eight runs in the series' five games.

"Last year was difficult. Our team was incredible. We had an All-Star team, basically, and we couldn't put it together," said Estrada. "We had our opportunities. We didn't take advantage of it. We should still be playing. I thought our team was stacked again, but we couldn't pull it off."

With trade-deadline acquisition David Price the only key piece not returning to Toronto for the 2016 season after losing in the ALCS to the Royals, the feeling was that the team was on the cusp of greatness.

Here they are a year later, in the exact same place, and boy does it feel different now. Bautista and Encarnacion are free agents and both said they don't know what the future holds. Same goes for Michael Saunders, Brett Cecil and R.A. Dickey. These timelines in professional sports move fast, man.

"We would love to have everybody back. We would love to have [Bautista] back, we would love to have [Encarnacion] back," said Donaldson. "These guys have been faces of the franchise for many years now and anyone who watches the Toronto Blue Jays or watches the game of baseball knows how important they are to our team."

President Mark Shapiro confirmed manager John Gibbons would be back next season. He wouldn't commit to anything beyond that.

"I think you start with building a championship team. It's not about individual players. You build the best team possible," said Shapiro. "We need to determine what resources we've got and look to build the best team to build – the team that has the best chance to win the World Series. That's the goal."

The building blocks are there with young pitchers Aaron Sanchez, Marcus Stroman and Roberto Osuna. Estrada,

J.A. Happ and Francisco Liriano are veterans they can rely on for quality innings. For the first time in years, the questions with the Blue Jays start with the offense.

The team that went to the ALCS in back to back years and changed baseball in Toronto might be undergoing a few changes in the offseason.

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