

Kyle Lowry makes Raptors' Game 1 loss memorable in more ways than one

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TORONTO – The Raptors' long-awaited return to the second round of the playoffs will be remembered for two things: Kyle Lowry's shot and Kyle Lowry's shooting.

First, the shot: Lowry launched a desperation half-court heave to beat the buzzer, tying the score 90-90, and sending a game that looked like it was lost into overtime. A half-empty Air Canada Centre crowd, with most of the fans already in their cars or headed to the subway, went crazy.

The joy was brief. The Miami Heat scored the first eight points of overtime, ultimately outscoring 12-6 Toronto, to take Game 1 102-96 on Tuesday night.

As for the shooting, Lowry went 3-for-12 from the field in regulation and 0-for-1 in overtime. His shooting percentage through eight playoff games is 30.6 per cent, the worst mark by a player with a minimum 100 shot attempts in the last 50 years.

While Lowry has laboured since the playoffs began, it was painfully obvious from the start the Raptors and Heat were still recovering from first-round series that went the maximum seven games. The play was choppy as Toronto and Miami each aimed to figure out how the other side was going to approach the game and individual matchups.

"Both teams played a couple days ago, so we still had the engine going," said DeMar DeRozan. "It was moreso just understanding the dynamics of the game. It's much different from us playing Indiana and them playing Charlotte and just trying to catch a rhythm with that. It was a little wild early on, but I think both teams should have a grip on how this series is going to play out."

After accurately pointing out before the first round began against Indiana that turnovers would decide the outcome,

Raptors head coach Dwane Casey identified points in the paint as the key to the matchup against Miami.

"[It's] something that will determine how well we're playing defensively," said Casey. "They have some excellent drivers, hard-charging drivers attacking the paint so our one-on-one defence is going to have to be pristine."

It will also be indicative of how much Hassan Whiteside, the NBA's leading shot-blocker this season, disrupts Toronto's penetration and how well Jonas Valanciunas establishes his presence inside with his early touches.

But really, there is only one key that matters, at least if the Raptors are going to have a realistic chance to win the series: that miracle make aside, it remains painfully obvious Lowry is still not right.

Lowry scored seven points in over 42 minutes, that's five more than Heat veteran Udonis Haslem scored in five minutes, and 19 less than Goran Dragic, who scored a game-high 26.

The Raptors survived the Pacers while Lowry struggled with his shot. That won't be so easy this time through. Valanciunas had 24 points and 14 rebounds. DeRozan scored 22 points. Terrence Ross came off the bench and poured in 19 and Cory Joseph was his usual steady hand with 10. It wasn't enough.

The Heat are more experienced and more talented than Indiana – Dwyane Wade is a three-time NBA champion and Dragic, Joe Johnson, and Luol Deng are veterans of deep playoff runs – and while Whiteside, Justise Winslow, and Josh Richardson are here for the first time, they've thrived in meaningful minutes for Miami this season.

Toronto battled the pressure of their past in the Pacers series, needing every last minute to push through. That was necessary to keep this core together. Now that they're where they're supposed to be, the work has really begun.

"People are human. The pressure was definitely thick," said Casey. "We're in that type of business. We have to make sure we embrace it; we cherish it. We appreciate the fan interest, the media interest that is there. People care. Hopefully we can move on past that and talk about a pick-and-roll defence and not a 15-year history. I'm glad for the organization that it's behind us."

Getting on from that history will only be possible, however, if Lowry can bust out of a historic shooting slump – and the time for him to figure it out has already shrunk by a loss.

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