

Raptors' All-Stars Lowry, DeRozan cherish moment, but chase bigger prize

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TORONTO – When the NBA announced Toronto would host the 2016 All-Star Game back in 2013 the Raptors were contemplating a complete rebuild and had no All-Stars on the roster.

A lot can change in just less than three years. The Raptors have made two straight playoff appearances since then and are comfortably headed to a third, led by their two – now multi-time – All-Stars.

Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan took the court Sunday at the Air Canada Centre with the Eastern Conference All-Star team and they absolutely belonged.

Lowry took his place with the East starters and hit an early three in an attempt to put behind his first-round exit in Saturday's three-point shootout. DeRozan entered the game midway through the first quarter and made his mark on the game with a number of thunderous dunks including an impressive two-handed 360 throwdown. The East lost 196-173 to the West as DeRozan scored 18 points and Lowry had 14 points and 10 assists, but as is always the case with these showcase games, there's so much more to it than the final score.

While the two relished their roles as the weekend's unofficial hosts, addressing the fans on behalf of the players before the opening tip, they were also more than happy to cede the spotlight to Kobe Bryant, who will retire at the end of the season and was making his 18th and final All-Star game appearance. Like Lowry, Bryant was born in Philadelphia and, of course, he played his entire professional career with the Los Angeles Lakers, DeRozan's favourite team growing up in Southern California.

"Every time you get out there and get to play with these amazing athletes and players, it's always fun," said Lowry.

"It's entertaining. You always cherish the moment. You always just cherish the moments."

These are certainly moments worth cherishing, considering where Lowry, DeRozan, and the Raptors were just a few years ago and where they are now.

DeRozan arrived in Toronto in 2009 as a first-round pick from USC. Just 20 years old at the time he made his NBA debut, DeRozan was raw and there were admittedly holes in his game. Every year he's been in the league he's improved. He's a much better player than he was when he made his first All-Star appearance in 2014 and for that the Raptors are a much better team.

Lowry's talent was evident during his stints in Memphis and Houston, but a difficult personality led to clashes with coaches and eventually led to his trade to Toronto. Even the early days with the Raptors were a little rocky, with fan favourite Jose Calderon the incumbent starting point guard. Lowry and Calderon shared duties for half a season, until Calderon was traded away, opening up a huge opportunity for Lowry to take the reins and run with them.

And did he ever. This is reality: Toronto hosted an NBA All-Star game to rave reviews and had two deserving players take the stage. And the best part from all of this? It feels like this is just the beginning, with bigger accomplishments for the city, its NBA team, and the two players who raised their game to an All-Star level on the way.

"We've got to understand that we're playing for something big, not just to win games to get in the playoffs and make some noise," said DeRozan. "I think [these] next 30 games is definitely a teaching tool for us to understand how we've got to win games every single night."

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