

Raptors hold on to win Game 7, take long way back to second round

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TORONTO – It wasn't supposed to come to this, at least not this early on: a Game 7 with the season on the line. Maybe in the second round. In the conference finals? Heck, that'd be an accomplishment. But a Game 7 in the first round? Something must have gone terribly wrong.

Yet this is where the Raptors found themselves Sunday night, punishment for their uneven play in a series against the Indiana Pacers they entered as heavy favourites.

The game was at home – the benefit of being the two seed in the East – but that was of little comfort to the fan base. Maybe the nerves would subside when the game would tip off. The notoriously late arriving Drake was in his seat over half an hour before the scheduled start time. The anticipation in the arena was exceeded only by anxiety.

Can you blame them? Vince Carter's [infamous missed jumper](#) against the 76ers in 2001 and Kyle Lowry's [last-ditch layup that was blocked](#) by Paul Pierce against the Nets two years ago, the only other Game 7s in franchise history, hung over the proceedings like a dark cloud threatening a nasty storm. The fan base, understandably frayed by repeated disappointment, wouldn't believe the home team had won until 0:00 showed up on the scoreboard and the final buzzer sounded.

Feeling charitable, the Raptors let everyone exhale a little earlier than expected. DeMar DeRozan hit two free throws with 6.5 seconds remaining to put Toronto up five and seal an [89-84 win](#). For once the ending went Toronto's way in a Game 7, even if the 11 fourth-quarter points didn't exactly inspire confidence. Beggars can't be choosers.

"We took some tired shots, made some tired plays down the stretch. They were so jacked up and wanted it so bad I thought they were exhausted emotionally and physically. It wasn't pretty," said head coach Dwane Casey. "Hopefully this get the monkey off our back. I hope everyone continues to doubt. I think that's motivation for us. I thought our

crowd carried us through stretches where we were tired. That's why we earned home court advantage and that was the difference."

A lead that had been as large as 16 points was whittled down by the Pacers to three with under a minute to play. Same old Raptors, it seemed. Those two Game 7 losses had both come by a single point. It couldn't happen again, could it?

Paul George had the ball and the opportunity to tie the game for Indiana, but his pass out of a double team was intercepted by DeRozan.

The Raptors survived, and the celebration reflected a team understanding it had (finally) done what it was supposed to do. The atmosphere in the locker room was muted. Outside of general manager Masai Ujiri interrupting Casey's postgame press conference to kiss his coach on the top of the head, it felt no different than a regular season win; Toronto had a franchise-record 56 of those this season.

For better or worse, DeRozan attacked, his 30 points coming on 32 shots. Kyle Lowry's shooting struggles continued, too, going 5-for-14 from the floor, but he made an impact dishing out nine assists.

Norman Powell and Cory Joseph stepped up, especially during a second quarter stretch when Toronto managed to keep the pesky Pacers at bay.

Powell, a rookie who didn't play regularly until the last two months of the season, doesn't know any better. His rapid growth hasn't been affected whatsoever by the bright lights of the playoffs. The 23-year-old swingman confidently stepped into his six shots in Game 7: he sunk five of them, including three three-pointers, and did a terrific job matching up with George on the defensive end.

Joseph knows about the Raptors' past better than most, at least for someone who hadn't played a game for the team until this season. He has vivid memories of watching Carter's shot rim out 15 years ago as a nine-year-old watching on TV at home just north of Toronto in Pickering, Ont. Fifteen years later Joseph, who had eight points and four assists, was on the court for his hometown team providing the steady hand the Raptors desperately needed; further proof that enough time in San Antonio can scrub just about anyone clean.

"This is special to me because I'm from here. I know the struggles the organization has been through, not getting out of the first round in a long time," said Joseph. "I was watching all the games, the heartbreaking loss in the second round – the Vince Carter turnaround corner three against Philadelphia. I watched all those games. I remember."

Jonas Valanciunas and Bismack Biyombo pounded the glass, grabbing 15 and 11 rebounds apiece. Patrick Patterson hit big shots, finishing with 11 points. DeMarre Carroll played over 36 minutes and spent most of that time guarding George, who still finished with 26 points to cap a brilliant display leading the underdog Pacers over seven games.

The Raptors took the long way back: as a franchise and in this series, but they got the result they wanted, or more accurately, needed. They're moving onto the second round and into a matchup with the Miami Heat. Now it's time to get after it, and really put the past behind.

"We got the monkey off our back, more than anything, from the past couple years. It feels good to get that off," said DeRozan. "We were going to leave it all out there, whatever we had from the beginning to the end. That's how all the guys played tonight."

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