

# Raptors play big in Game 7 win over Heat, advance to conference finals

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By Israel Fehr

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TORONTO – In a season filled with firsts, this is the most significant one yet: For the first time in franchise history, the Toronto Raptors are headed to the Eastern Conference finals.

When Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan checked out with 2:34 remaining in the fourth quarter, the Air Canada Centre crowd began to celebrate. The Raptors' All-Stars watched the conclusion of Toronto's 116-89 win over the Miami Heat in Game 7 on Sunday afternoon from the comforts of the bench, clinching a tightly-contested semifinal series that was anything but comfortable and included three overtime games. His job done, Lowry soaked in the historic moment along with the fans, and was thankful the job was done in 48 minutes.

"The things we've been through this year and how hard we've worked, it's kind of an emotional time to be able to sit there, relax and breathe and not go to overtime," said Lowry. "Playing against a team like Miami, it pushed us to the limit."

In a playoff run already filled with ups and downs, the Raptors rose up to deliver their best all-around game in a month when they needed it the most. Lowry scored 35 and DeRozan scored 28. Bismack Biyombo and DeMarre Carroll were outstanding on both ends of the floor and Patrick Patterson and Terrence Ross stepped up with timely contributions.

Toronto came up big, figuratively, and the key was playing big. Miami stayed small, starting a frontcourt made up of three traditional wing players as they continue to deal with the absence of injured centre Hassan Whiteside. It was a strategy that worked wonders for them in Game 6 and one they hoped would lead them to a win on the road in a hostile environment.

It turned out to be wishful thinking. The Raptors dominated near the basket, earning 43 free throws and coming

down with 20 offensive rebounds leading to 27 second-chance points. Overall Toronto outrebounded Miami 50-30, as Biyombo grabbed a game-high 16 and Patterson was also in double digits with 11.

"I thought as the game went on we got locked in and did a much better job of guarding the basketball and keeping the ball in front of us," said head coach Dwane Casey. "We didn't play big in our last game. I thought tonight we played big. Tonight I thought our big guys made them pay."

Miami's starters all scored more than 10 points, led by Dwyane Wade and Goran Dragic with 16. The Heat hung around in the first half, punched back after the Raptors went up 17 in the third quarter and got it back to six. But they were out of gas in the fourth and Toronto pulled away, outscoring Miami 30-11 over the final 12 minutes.

"We came out and we haven't played that type of basketball (that we did) in the quarter in the whole series," said Carroll, who had 14 points. "I felt like we came out and told them weren't going to take no more and we kept running it down their throat and doing it on the defensive end and we got the win."

An easy ending was nice for a change. The Raptors needed seven games in each of their series. The Cavaliers needed eight games total to win their eight, and haven't played in nine days. Game 1 of the Eastern Conference finals between the two is Tuesday night in Cleveland.

The extra games for Toronto, and the grinding nature of those games, have taken their toll. Jonas Valanciunas has missed the last four games after spraining his right ankle and his return in these playoffs is uncertain.

It hasn't been pretty, yet here they are, having survived the playoffs better than any other Raptors team. The challenge of playing LeBron James, Kyrie Irving, Kevin Love and the Cavaliers is next.

"For this program, from where we started to where we are now it's very important. I think we've done everything we've set out to do. We're not done yet," said Casey. "I know what it's like to win a championship (as an assistant with Dallas in 2011). I'm not saying we can do that, but I think this group is hungry. Never say never. I know one thing: our guys will compete."

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