

Raptors' season ends but they leave with their heads held high

ca.sports.yahoo.com/blogs/eh-game/raptors--season-ends-but-they-leave-with-their-heads-held-high-054619840.html

By Israel Fehr

5/28/2016

TORONTO – All season long the Raptors answered challenge after challenge. Two players in a [hometown All-Star game](#)? Check. Best regular season in [team history](#)? Check. [Getting past the first round](#) for the first time since the Vince Carter days? Yep, that too. It took until the Eastern Conference finals – a place the franchise had not gone before – for them to meet their match.

On their third try this series, LeBron James and the Cleveland Cavaliers figured out how to win in Toronto, beating the Raptors [113-87 on Friday night](#) to clinch a spot in the NBA Finals and bring to an end one unbelievable basketball season in the north.

Don't be fooled by the final score. The Raptors went down fighting. With three minutes left in the fourth quarter, when it finally reached a point where there wasn't enough time to overturn the deficit, Kyle Lowry and DeMar DeRozan went over to the Cavaliers bench to embrace and congratulate members of the team that was a deserving winner.

"Tip our hats to those guys. They did what we want to do, and they've been to where we want to get to. They played unbelievable so far these playoffs. Give them all the credit; they beat us fair and square, and their guys played well. They're a talented group, and they've got a chance to win an NBA championship. That's where we want to be," said Lowry, who scored 35 points while DeRozan added 20.



"This series was fun to be a part of. Like I say, I'm disappointed, but it just shows how much harder it is to get to that point."

The final buzzer sounded and Lowry, DeRozan, and the Raptors walked off the Air Canada Centre court to chants of "Let's Go Raptors" and "We The North" from a crowd that had even James [searching for superlatives](#), and into a locker room where the mood did not reflect the result of the game. The emotions were understandably raw, but overall the atmosphere was closer to celebratory than crushed.

Rookies Norman Powell and Delon Wright went around collecting signatures from their teammates on a basketball. Luis Scola was slightly bemused by the fact LeBron foiled him in the conference finals once again, first with the Pacers in 2014 and now with the Raptors. Patrick Patterson thought back to when he arrived in Toronto in a trade in December 2013 and found it hard to believe how far this team had come since then. Cory Joseph, the Canadian kid who grew up going to games in this arena, reveled in seeing his city and his team reach unprecedented heights. DeMarre Carroll was asked, now that there are no games to be played until October, how many injuries he was dealing with. Early in the regular season it was his foot, then his knee that required surgery, and most recently his elbow.

"How long are you here for?" Carroll responded with a wry smile.

It's the answer to a different question, but Jonas Valanciunas wants to be here every year. Getting this far and learning lessons that can only be acquired by experience has only increased the appetite to be here consistently.

"I think in the playoffs, it's a thinking game," said Valanciunas. "How are you going to make the little plays? How are you going to make those small adjustments?"

"It's about stretches. Sometimes you're playing slow and you have to read the game. Sometimes you're pushing. If you've never been there, you don't know how it looks like."

And sometimes, when James, Kyrie Irving, and Kevin Love combine to score 83 points like they did in Game 6, it doesn't matter what you do. There's not much Dwane Casey and his coaching staff can come up with to combat that level of individual talent.

But now, like Valanciunas said, at least they know what it looks like. Toronto won 56 games to earn the No. 2 seed in the Eastern Conference and went on a playoff run that finished with them two wins away from the finals and optimistic that the best is yet to come.

"I really think we're a step ahead in the process. The players worked and put themselves in this process. We're still a relatively young team to talk about competing for a championship, but they put themselves in that position by hard work and fighting through things this season," said Casey. "We just talked in there a while ago about what each guy has to do, what they have to bring back to the table for us to take the next step, that next step, and it's not going to be easy."

"Now the target is on your back. It's going to be even more so when people talk about the Toronto Raptors. We're one of four teams left. We should be proud of that, but not satisfied."

About that ball Powell got his teammates to sign. He plans to give it to his mom, Sharon, as a gift to commemorate his first season in the pros. Powell, and every one of his Raptors teammates who signed that ball, gave their fans the gift of the finest season they've ever seen. The fans made sure the players heard loud and clear, with their chants and cheers, how much they appreciate it.

Israel Fehr is a writer for [Yahoo Canada Sports](#). Email him at israelfehr@yahoo.ca or follow him on Twitter. [Follow @israelfehr](#)