

# ALCS-bound Blue Jays ready to do what they couldn't last season

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TORONTO – These [Toronto Blue Jays](#) did not enter the postseason as the team to beat. That was last season. They did not have the most feared offense in baseball. That was last season, too. Sure, their starting pitching was finally up to snuff, but their bullpen was thin and their play most of September was about as far from ready-to-do-this as you could get. It was much closer to: what are they doing?

And yet here they are, headed to the ALCS for a second straight year. And despite all of the above, feeling like they're ready to do what they couldn't do last season.

Can you blame them? Sunday night's [7-6 walk-off win](#) to sweep the [Texas Rangers](#) in the ALDS was Toronto's sixth straight win: the two final regular season games – games they needed to clinch home field in the wild-card game – that wild-card game, also a walk-off, and the three games in the division series.

In those six games, everything has come together, after a month where it seemed like nothing could go right. [Josh Donaldson](#) scored the winning run in Game 3 in the 10th inning, darting home from third base after Rangers first baseman [Mitch Moreland](#) bobbled the ball receiving a throw from second baseman Rowned Odor. Donaldson pounced on an opportunity to punish Texas for a sloppy play and he delivered.

It was dramatic, and a fitting finish for a series and rivalry packed with it, but the drama stops there. Suddenly, the Blue Jays are on a roll in an American League that lacked a true juggernaut. The crown is there for the taking.

Toronto's starting pitching has been their strength all season, and Marco Estrada's outstanding Game 1 start was the only start of the three in the ALDS that would qualify as above average. The bullpen, pressed into action early in Games 2 and 3, came up huge. And that offense that petrified pitchers last year is showing signs of life: seven Blue Jays players combined to hit eight home runs against Texas.

"We definitely feel good about where we are at right now," said Donaldson. "We're pitching well and we're playing good defense and right now we've been able to hit the homer. And that's a big – that's a big positive for our offense, because there's times when we rely on that, because we don't have a lot of guys in our lineup that are speed-oriented and that are going to really take advantage of a lot of extra bases. That's not how we're really built.

"But we are built to hit the long ball and we were able to do that this series. And it's going to be important for us throughout the entire way."

The home runs attract the most attention, but what sparked Toronto's incredible late-season run in 2015, more than anything, was how trade-deadline acquisition [Troy Tulowitzki](#) was the final piece needed to shore up their defense up the middle. It made a world of difference. With Tulowitzki at short, [Kevin Pillar](#) in center and [Russell Martin](#) behind the plate, there might not be a better defensive group at the three most important defensive positions in the game.

And that hasn't changed. Pillar nearly made a sensational diving catch on a ball hit to left-center field. He didn't though, the ball narrowly missed his glove, and two runs came across to give the Rangers the lead. The Blue Jays tied the game in the next half-inning and of course went on to win it in extras, but that play was still on Pillar's mind, even as he stood in Toronto's clubhouse surrounded by champagne bottles, beer cans and celebrating teammates.

"I was scary close; too close. It's going to haunt my dreams tonight," said Pillar. "Hopefully I can forget about it because winning is the only thing that matters, but I feel like that's a play I need to make. I feel like that's what I'm out there to do."



A celebratory clubhouse in October is what Mark Shapiro expected to see when he took over as Blue Jays president heading into this season. He knew the team he more or less inherited from former general manager Alex Anthopoulos was going to be a contender. Shapiro didn't envision the ups and downs that played out over the course of the regular season, but now he sees them as a positive as the stakes and intensity rise the deeper the team goes.

"I think the fact of how we've had to win this year, it's been a grind every step of the way, but these guys have battled and never given in," said Shapiro. "Even when it felt pretty bleak, they believed in the talent and they believed in each other. And so I think, how they're playing when the games mean the most is a reflection of the team and their belief in each other."

No, it wasn't easy. Especially compared to how it must have felt down the stretch in 2015, when the Blue Jays positioned themselves as an unstoppable force. [Michael Saunders](#) watched it unfold from the dugout last year, sidelined with a knee injury for almost the entire season, and watched it end in the ALCS against the eventual World Series champion Royals. This year he's right in the thick of it, and while it didn't seem so likely as recently as two weeks ago, so is his team.

"That's why you have to live in the moment. That's why you play 162. You know the best teams are the ones, or at least the most deserving teams, are the ones that are here right now," said Saunders. "Our September wasn't the best month of our season, but nonetheless we got to where we wanted to get to and our ultimate goal is the World Series."

The ultimate goal is within reach: the World Series is now four wins away. The Blue Jays will open the ALCS on the road, either in Cleveland or Boston, on Friday. They took one heck of a different route to get there this season. They're striving to pull off a different result, too.

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