

RAPTORS HAVE THEIR FANS THINKING 'TITLE'

Toronto Maple Leafs may be Stanley Cup contenders and the darlings of Canada's two major sports networks, but the basketball Raptors are the most successful sports story in Hogtown.

The Raptors, peripheral contenders in the National Basketball Association for the past couple of years, are legitimate threats to bring the Larry O'Brien trophy to Canada for the first time.

The Raptors, with a new coach and a new 'face of the franchise', are the class of the Eastern Conference, at least in the early going. With a franchise-best start of 21-6, Toronto held a comfortable lead over runner-up Milwaukee Bucks.

Any championship talk must be tempered, of course, because the league's Western Conference is where the perceived real power (i.e. Golden State Warriors, Denver Nuggets, Oklahoma City Thunder) reside. Still, the Raptors are a strong favourite to get out of the Eastern Conference and, as any sports fan knows, anything can happen in a seven-game series.

After last year's second-round playoff exit at the hands of the Cleveland Cavaliers, the Raptors fired coach Dwane Casey, who was honoured as NBA coach of the year a few days after his dismissal. Nick Nurse, an assistant in charge of offence under Casey, was moved up, and so far, every move he has made has been golden.

Much of that is thanks to the spectacular play of Kawhi Leonard, who was acquired from San Antonio in the off-season as the Raptors dealt away their former top scorer, DeMar DeRozan. Leonard's main strength is on the defensive side of the ball but with the Raptors he's filling the hoop to the tune of a team-leading 26 points a game, among the top 10 in the league. Raptor veterans Serge Ibaka and Kyle Lowry are scoring in the mid-teens per game while second-year forward Pascal Siakam is fourth in team scoring with more than 14 PPG.

Columnist Scott Stinson of The National Post suggests it could be a long playoff run for the Raptors: "... for many seasons now, even as they changed the team from NBA afterthought to serious contender, they have lacked the kind of star who could simply take over the game against high-level competition."

With Leonard, they now have that star. And title talk has become serious around Toronto.

- **Brad Rock** of the Deseret News: "Golfer **Pat Perez** was hilariously direct when asked in 2017 how he planned to approach his game, now that he had 'matured.' "'I'm not going to change anything. I'm still not going to work out. I'm still going to have a bad diet. I'm going to enjoy myself.' He won't make the World Golf Hall of Fame, but he's a shoo-in for the Broadcast Hall of Fame."
- **Norman Chad** of the Washington Post, on his stepson, a pro basketball player in the Israeli pro league, **Isaiah Eisendorf**: "He's 6-foot-6, 225 pounds and very coachable, unless you tell him to cut the grass or take out the trash."
- Comedy writer **Jim Barach**: "A rumour says the Dodgers' **Manny Machado** will sign with the Phillies. With an expected contract offer of \$300 million, he will show what hustle is in how fast he gets to the signing table."
- Another one from Barach: "**Tiger Woods** says he is struggling to keep weight on. Which means any day he could be hiring **John Daly** as his nutritional consultant."
- Retired sports columnist **Mike Downey** suggests a name for Seattle's NHL franchise: "Starpucks."
- **Greg Cote** of the Miami Herald: "The World Series trophy was damaged by a thrown full can of beer during the Red Sox championship parade. That's terrible. Talk about a waste of beer!"
- **RJ Currie** of sportsdeke.com: "**Erik Guay** has retired as Canada's most decorated skier with 25 podium finishes and two overall titles. In the minds of Canadians, he's 1-2 with **Justin Bieber** for going downhill fast."
- Currie again: "Prince George Cougars' toss-a-teddy-bear-for-kids-game organizers asked fans for warm clothing instead. If you want teddy bears on ice these days, try watching a Canucks game."
- **Dwight Perry** of the Seattle Times: "The NFL suspended 49ers long snapper **Kyle Nelson** 10 games after he tested positive for PEDs. His teammates, undeterred, are vowing to Win One For The Snapper."
- ESPN motormouth **Bill Walton**, as quoted in the Pocono (Pa.) Record, on overcoming a speech impediment in his younger days: "English was my fifth language after stammering, stumbling, stuttering and spitting."
- B.C. comic **Torben Rolfson**, on the NHL announcing it will expand to 32 teams in the 2021-22 season: "**Gary Bettman**'s first and last day of not getting booed in Seattle."
- One more from Barach, after Mavericks guard **Dennis Smith** lost a tooth while scrambling for a loose ball: "Even worse, the missing tooth caused him to repeatedly double-dribble."

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