



## ***The 2020 Toronto Raptors are the best Raptors team of 'all-time', despite the loss of Kawhi Leonard.***

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Formed in 1995 the Toronto Raptors are currently embarking on the best form a Raptor team has ever seen in its short history. Prior to the Championship run in the 2018-2019 season, the Raptors had only made it past the semi-finals to the Conference Finals once before in the 2015-2016 season. It is proven that the Toronto based team has a short history when it comes to winning, with their best years coming in more recent history. As explained previously the Raptors had the best seasonal winning percentage in franchise history this year (.730) (Page, 2020) something nobody outside of Toronto saw coming.

Although the Toronto Raptors did not reach the holy land this year and win the Championship, this team has certainly shown their case for being the best the franchise has ever seen. Nick Nurse's new and improved offence and defence, and Toronto's emerging stars and role players, and their team defence has been the key to filling the void that superstar Kawhi Leonard left when he departed from the team.

Toronto has the championship DNA that has prevented so many teams from taking the next step towards being a championship-calibre side. And yet, Toronto is right there with no unanimous star but with a team seeping with championship DNA.

### **Nick Nurse and a team full of Role Players**

Nick has been working behind the scenes prior to taking up the coaching reigns in 2018 crafting his game-changing game style. After Dwayne Casey's inevitable firing from failing to defeat LeBron James' Cleveland Cavaliers for the third consecutive year. Nick was appointed head coach and revolutionised the Raptors offence focusing more on a pass-first offence rather than an isolation first mentality. However, as long as DeMar DeRozan was at the helm of the Raptors offence and the team was never going to succeed due to his flawed offensive game. Which lead to the trade before the 2018-2019 season for Kawhi Leonard and, although Kawhi Leonard was a more rounded offensive player with an incredible

defensive attitude it was the same situation. The Raptors offence could not flourish as long as there was an emphatical star. Yes, every offence needs a star but ironically the Raptors offence performs better as a team rather than through a star.

Although the Toronto Raptors are without their main man from last season, Nick Nurse their head coach unexpectedly has filled the void. Nurse was praised by peers and critics for how he was able to turn his team with no defined star into a championship-calibre side and because of his ability to do so he received Coach of The Year honours (placing first in 90 of the 100 ballots (Bontemps, 2020)). On the court, Siakam is the clear cut up and coming star but it is how he fits into Nick's offence that has led to Pascal's flourishing. Nick's offence takes notes from his opponents and develops them into his own style with the San Antonio Spurs being his biggest influence and it is shown in the way the Raptors conduct themselves. Now with the prime star gone the Raptors have focused primarily on a pass-first game style with the players putting faith in the 'someone always has a better shot' theory. This is shown by how the Raptors have become the first team since 1973 to have five players averaging fifteen points per game in a season (McGregor, 2020). Proving that the offence had been formed to work without a star and was succeeding. Watch an example from each season, one with Kawhi being the center of the offence and one with the team as the center.

(Kawhi Leonard best moments <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6VtQOWiPOII> NBA, 2020 [2])

(Team Moments [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h\\_XahOCpbhs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_XahOCpbhs) (NBA, 2020 [1])

When watching Kawhi's moments, we can see multiple shot attempts throughout the first 5 minutes (2:00. 2:38. 3:01. 3:48.) that if any other player attempted, they would be scrutinised for since these shots are low percentage. Let us discuss the first example, at the 2-minute mark we can see Kawhi using a pick and roll and driving to the hoop, the shot Leonard takes is a highly difficult reverse layup against one of the premier defenders in the league (two-time Defensive Player of The Year Rudy Gobert), luckily it goes in. If this were the 2020 Raptors a pass would have delivered to a flaring Fred VanVleet (Number 23).

When analysing the pass-first offence in 2020 we can see numerous occasions where the scorer does not matter, and the Raptor's primary focus is to find the best shot. The best examples of the team game plan are at the 6:56 mark and the 7:46 mark. In both situations the Raptors swing the ball around the three-point line to find a one-on-one post up for Siakam who has solidified himself as a low-post practitioner, the clean ball movement leads to two consecutive conversions plus two fouls. This here is proof that the Raptors game-plan is working on all cylinders in 2020 with the players having faith in finding the best shot.

It's evident that the offence was more stagnant when Kawhi was the focal point of the offence while in the most recent season the footage shows the offence is free flowing, with the 2020 Raptors wanting to run the ball more frequently instead of playing in a halfcourt setting. Looking around at the team during those clips we see two entirely different off-ball movement techniques, one that barely moves (limiting chances to score) and one that is

constantly moving to try to get open or create for another player. When analysing the team's plays from the two seasons, we can see the Kawhi era Raptors went to isolation plays 6.9% of the time, while this season the Raptors only went to isolation plays 6.1% of the time. This is statistically significant as it dropped the Raptors isolation percentile ranking from 82.8 to 58.6, which is a large decrease from last season (Teams Isolation, 2020).

Players like Pascal and Fred VanVleet score large numbers since they are in the best position, not because they are the primary scoring options. The Raptors have a lot of great players, with emerging franchise players like Pascal Siakam, Fred VanVleet, and OG Anunoby. However, none of these Raptors are defined stars, they are just really good role players, and that is why this team so impactful. For a team with no characterised star, they have a better win-loss ratio percentage this year than the year prior when they had Kawhi Leonard (Page, 2020).

A key reason for this team's success this year and in previous years is because there is no volatile ego to this team. Once again it is shown through their gameplan of somebody is always in a better position. For example, when OG Anunoby was asked by the media about his game-winning three-pointer to prevent the Raptors from going down 3-0 against the Boston Celtics. OG was nonchalant about his shot and how meaningful it was for their season, the only emotion shown was merely to praise his teammate for giving him a great pass.

"Oh yeah, Kyle made a great pass... he waited long enough then threw it in the air quick enough for me to get it off before they got to me. It was a great pass by Kyle." OG Said "...uh it was cool, just get ready for game 4." (Toronto Raptors, 2020 [1])

That is all he said about his own personal accolade, nothing about how happy or overjoyed he is about making the shot, just how great the set-up was.

## **Team Defence**

There is a more equal share of responsibility when it comes to this team compared to previous years and that is even more prevalent on the defensive side of the court. Although Kawhi Leonard was named Defensive Player of the Year twice (2015, 2016) the Raptors statistically were better defensively without him. Ranking 2nd in defensive rating at 104.7 and coming 2nd for most steals per game at 8.8 compared to the previous year when the Raptor's finished 5th in defensive rating (106.8) and 9th in steals (9.3) (Home, 2020).

When speaking to the media Nick Nurse discussed Toronto's wide range of defensive schemes, they can call on this year compared to last year

"...our menu of the things we can do at this point compared to this point a year ago has like quadrupled if not more." He went on to say "Last year we were playing fundamental

foundation building defence and we had no schemes. And now we've got too many [laughs]." (Toronto Raptors, 2020 [2])

This is a focal point of Nick's coaching ability when the team can introduce four new players onto the team and the defence will not miss a step. While also showing how deep the Raptors truly are, as I stated earlier the players on this team know their roles, everyone must contribute on defence.

"...You've got some good footage to show them... we show clips from last playoffs before this game...I really want our new guys, young guys to do is to try and execute the schemes the way we're used to executing them.."

Players such as Pascal Siakam, OG Anunoby, and Kyle Lowry are so impactful on the defensive side of the floor since they can guard multiple positions, which is why Toronto is able to run so many different defensive schemes because of their depth and the range that their premier players can defend at.

Ultimately the Raptors fell short in the 2020 season, losing in 7 games against the Boston Celtics. However, for a team that was written off immediately after Kawhi Leonard's departure to Los Angeles, they significantly exceeded expectations. The perseverance, determination, and self-belief the Raptors hold are what separates this team from their competitors. An understandable frustrated Fred VanVleet summarised it perfectly when he spoke to the media after their season-ending loss to the Boston Celtics.

"...I'm proud of the effort that our guys gave, especially coming off a championship season and losing what we lost and coming into this season [Kawhi Leonard and the only people that expected us to be good, were the people in our locker room...]" (Toronto Raptors, 2020 [3])

If the Toronto Raptors are to repeat this historic season and improve on their diverse wide range of scoring and team defence, the Toronto based team must continue to have faith in one another and keep the same beliefs that separate them from their rivals. It is not every day that you see teamwork so fluidly without a designated star and a fundamental game plan that revolves around one. That is something that will keep the Raptors dangerous for as long as they are competing for a championship, their number one skill as a team is the trust they carry for each other, without it, this team would not exist. The growth of their role players such as Siakam, OG, and Fred VanVleet (if they can retain him in free agency) is critical for the team's future, with one possibly becoming a star, a welcomed headache for Nick Nurse.

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