

**Sports / Raptors****Fan interest in Raptors reaches fever pitch**

Fanbase coming out in droves to support winning team.

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LUCAS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR

It was Canadian Forces Night at the Air Canada Centre on Friday, and the game was a near-sellout as the Raptors and their winning ways have re-energized their fanbase.

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**By: Zoe McKnight** Staff Reporter, Published on Fri Jan 17 2014

There were pyrotechnics, there were hip-hop montages, there was beer and there was, of course, basketball.

That's all expected on game night. Less expected, until recently, is the fan fervour at [Toronto Raptors](#) games — Friday night's 94-89 victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves was nearly sold out, with only a handful of the pricy seats remaining by afternoon.

After a slam dunk and a three-pointer within the first quarter, the Raptors were off to a strong start amid deafening cheers and fans waving green "Let's Go Raptors" placards.

Raptors fans have been waiting for their team to "break through," said an animated Sheldon Pinto, 26, who chose the Raptors as his team at age 11 when he moved to Toronto from Kuwait. In a red Raptors ball cap, his enthusiasm was contagious.

"I think winning is a byproduct of a winning attitude," he said. "Let's go win championships. We're first in our division . . . onward and upward!"

His friend Alex Shaw, whom Pinto introduced to basketball, put it simply: "They're winning, that's why people are excited."

The past two weeks — during which the Raptors won three games in a row before [losing to the Boston Celtics](#) on Wednesday — have seen the highest ticket sales so far this season said Cameron Papp,

spokesman for ticket resale website Stubhub.

He said sales for the first 17 home games this season are nearly twice that of the first 17 games last season. That's due in part to the Raps playing the Miami Heat twice at the ACC as the Heat are the second-highest away team draw in this market for Stubhub after the New York Knicks.

New [global ambassador Drake](#) is also likely a factor. But more importantly, the Raptors are at the top of the Atlantic Division. They're playing the "right way now," since trading superstar and accused ball hog [Rudy Gay to the Sacramento Kings](#) back in December, said Raptorfan.com founder Burhan Ehsan.

Since the trade, he's attended almost every home game.

"Two months ago, nobody would have thought this game would sell out and now there's less than 50 tickets left," he said Friday afternoon.

There's also the intangible momentum created as fans start to believe in their team's chances.

"When you look around, people are into the game because it's meaningful now. Now all of a sudden you're expecting the Raptors to win a game. You're expecting them to make a comeback when they're down, and it's happening time and time again," Ehsan said.

Many thought the Raptors would tank after the landmark trade but the opposite has happened, as the team makes its way to [No. 3 in the Eastern Conference](#). The Raptors haven't been in the playoffs since 2008.

Self-proclaimed "superfan" Nav Bhatia is convinced. He hasn't missed a single regular-season game in 19 years. That's close to 900 games if you count playoffs and exhibition games, which he does. Not only are the seats full more often but the mood at the Air Canada Centre has changed recently, he said.

"Everybody's happy, even the players. They're getting to touch the ball now."

In nearly two decades as a diehard fan, Bhatia has seen it all.

"There's been so much up and down with the Raptors, yes. But we are going to make it to the playoffs. They're playing the way the game is supposed to be played."

For Canadian Armed Forces night, the home team donned camouflage uniforms as many military men and women watched from the stands.

Fans on Twitter joined in also, cracking jokes about how the army was present — with no tanks to be found.