



no KD no Ring  
By: Austin Rader

It's finally here.

Except with a minor plot twist.

For the first time since Michael Jordan retired, the NBA Finals won't feature Kobe Bryant, Tim Duncan, Dwyane Wade or LeBron James.

But the storyline of this series is if Kevin Durant can play.

If Kevin Durant is out for the entire series, the Toronto Raptors will win the series. It's as simple as that. The expected return of Demarcus Cousins possibly for games 1 or 2 could help Golden State's chances. However, if Kevin Durant can't play, the Raptors' chances of winning their first ever championship will skyrocket.

Durant's high ankle sprain is a Grade II injury. The timetable for an injury of that magnitude is 4 to 6 weeks. This means that June 5th will mark the 4 week anniversary of the injury, the same night as game 3. And there is still no update on when KD is expected to return.

I know that without Kevin Durant, Golden State was able to finish off Houston in game 6 and sweep the Portland Trailblazers to advance to the Finals. The Blazers had chances to win games 2, 3 and 4 but came up short. Durant leads all scorers in the postseason averaging 34

points per game. Steph Curry is playing out of his mind averaging 35.8 points per game in Durant's absence.

These teams met twice during the regular season with Toronto winning both of them. The first matchup was back in November in Toronto with the Raps winning 131-128 in overtime. Steph Curry was injured and did not play. The second matchup was in December with the Raptors blowing out the Warriors 113-93 in Golden State. Kwahi Leonard didn't even play. Toronto finished the regular season one game ahead of Golden State at 58-24, meaning they have home court advantage.

The keys to the Raptors capturing their first ever NBA Championship starts with slowing down Steph Curry. With KD out, it will be interesting to see who will guard Steph. Kyle Lowry is a great defender but they ought to use Kwahi to defend the sharpshooter. Nick Nurse can always adjust and guarding Steph will exhaust him throughout the game with all of the off-ball screens they'll fight through.

This series has a lot of great matchups. One of the most intriguing one is Pascal Siakam and Draymond Green guarding each other. This is the most interesting matchup given the scoring power of Siakam and the ability to finish at the rim. Green is an unbelievable defender, whether it's protecting the paint and blocking a shot or stepping in to take a charge Draymond's all over the place. He even gets the occasional technical foul call.

With Demarcus Cousins expected to return for game one, it adds more pressure for Marc Gasol to have a big series. This is both of these centers first Finals appearances and are both poised to have a big series. Gasol hit a huge three pointer to stretch the lead to four with 3:50 remaining. Although he doesn't have to be an offensive force in this series, it certainly will help. His role will be to clog the lane when Steph and Klay are driving in and to stay out of foul trouble.

Toronto has to win the battle off the bench. Bench points are crucial and Coach Nurse is okay with going 8 deep in the rotation. If he is going to stick with that, then all three of the bench players will need to score in double figures. Fred Vanvleet going 4-5 from three was crucial when Toronto was mounting their comeback against Milwaukee in Game 6. Serge Ibaka has experience playing in the Finals and is great at protecting the paint.

Golden State is going for their fourth Championship in five seasons. Experience is everything in the NBA postseason and the Warriors have just that. Coming off an emotional win, these Raptors will be nervous. However they do bring some experience to the table. Kwahi Leonard and Danny Green were both on those 2013 and 2014 San Antonio Spurs teams that appeared in back to back NBA Finals against the Heat, winning the second one. Kwahi won Finals MVP. The Warriors defensive plan will be to load up the paint to prevent Kwahi's mid-range and stop Siakam at the rim. Danny Green will need to knock down some big shots throughout this series.

This is the worst defensive Warriors team under Steve Kerr and its not even close. The Warriors offense has been so dominant that they haven't needed to rely on their defense to win games. The Raptors are able to push the tempo well and also slow the game down with their half-court sets. This will be a problem for Golden State. Toronto brings a lot of length and athleticism to the table. They're able to score from inside the paint and out on the perimeter. They will be tough to

stop. An important statistic will be turnovers but look out for which team is scoring the most off of the turnovers.

These teams should split the first two games in Toronto as the Raps will be jittery in game one and should bounce back in game two. Toronto will find a way to win either games three or four in Golden State, heading back to Toronto with the series tied 2-2. The teams will split in game 5 and game 6 with the home team winning each game. In game 7 in Toronto, the Raps will close out the Warriors and end their dynasty with Kwahi Leonard having another unbelievable performance.

Now if Kevin Durant comes back later in this series, then forget everything I just wrote because no one is stopping the Warriors with KD in the starting lineup.