

We Really Are the North: Raptors' unprecedented success draws attention from across the country

Canadians divided equally over whether Raptors are Canada's team or Toronto's team

June 6, 2019 – While basketball has a [loyal, diverse and youthful](#) fanbase in Canada, hockey's supremacy north of the 49th parallel has long been uncontested.

A new study from the Angus Reid Institute finds this may be changing in front of our eyes, at least during a magical playoff run for the Toronto Raptors this spring.

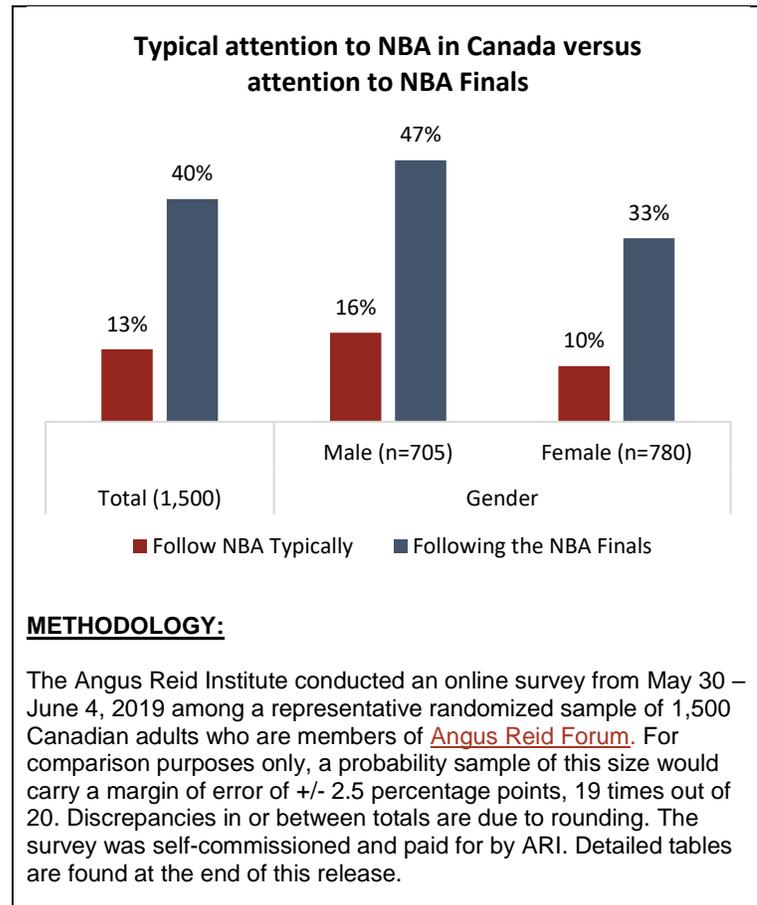
The team has battled through and defeated the best the Eastern Conference had to offer, en route to a first-ever appearance in the NBA Finals. And while traditionally only about one-in-ten Canadians say they follow the NBA, two-in-five (40%) say they are paying attention to the NBA Finals this year as Toronto attempts to [defy the oddsmakers](#).

The final foe is mighty: Oakland, California is home to the defending champion Golden State Warriors – winners of three of the last four NBA championships.

That said, Canadians are positive about the Raps' chances. More than half of those following the Finals (58%) say they give the team about a 50/50 shot of dethroning the Warriors, while one-in-five (18%) expect them to win the series. If they do, the nation will have one major problem to solve: close to equal numbers of Canadians say the Raptors are Canada's team (47%) and Toronto's team (45%).

More Key Findings:

- Raptors superfan Drake, who many have claimed is a curse on the teams or individuals he supports in sports, is not perceived to be bad luck by Canadians. Among all respondents, four times as many say he is good luck (26%) rather than bad (6%), while 43 per cent say he isn't having an impact either way
- Even if the Raptors do lose, it appears Canadians will not be overly disappointed. Three-quarters (76%) say it's enough of an achievement just to have made the finals for the first time in franchise history



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- If they had to choose between watching only the NBA Finals or only the NHL's Stanley Cup Finals, Canadians are divided. Four-in-ten would watch hockey (38%), one-third basketball (33%), and three-in-ten neither (29%)

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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Raptors, and basketball, on the rise

"Started from the bottom now we're here" – Drake, Started From the Bottom

The words of Aubrey Graham, better known as Drake, have been front and centre in the Toronto Raptors coverage over the past week. The team's first appearance in the NBA Finals has captured much of the nation's attention. This success comes as a stark contrast to the bitter playoff disappointment of the past several years, almost entirely at the hands of the NBA's biggest star – LeBron James.

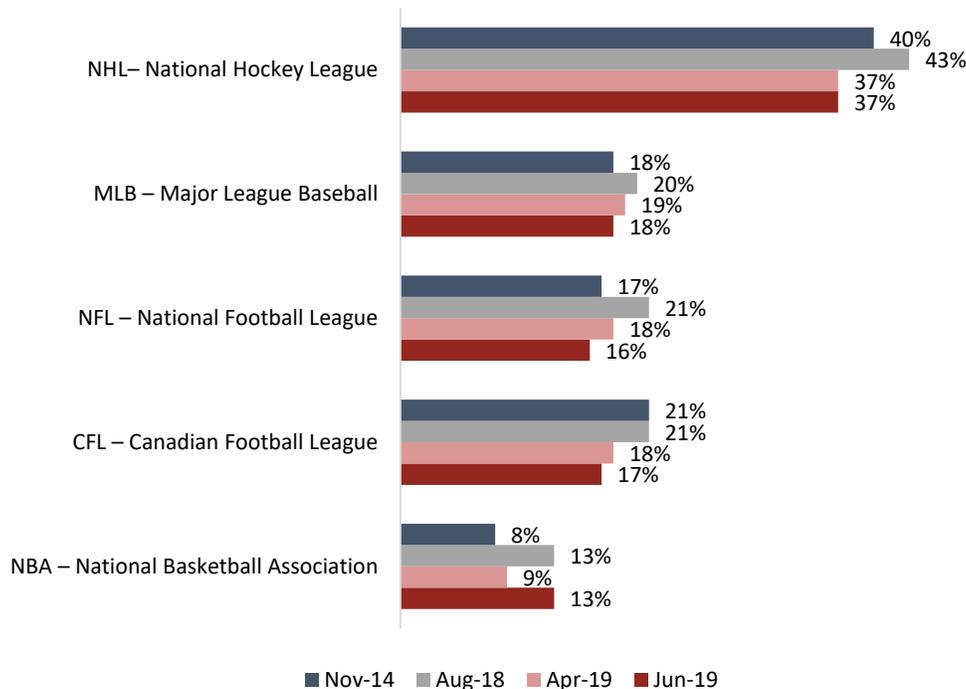
Canadians will be quick to tell you basketball was created by a Canadian—McGill University graduate James Naismith—but the game has evaded the attention of a large portion of the public in recent years.

Four-in-ten Canadians consistently say they follow the NHL closely, while closer to one-in-ten say this of the NBA. This is a trend that has held over the past five years:

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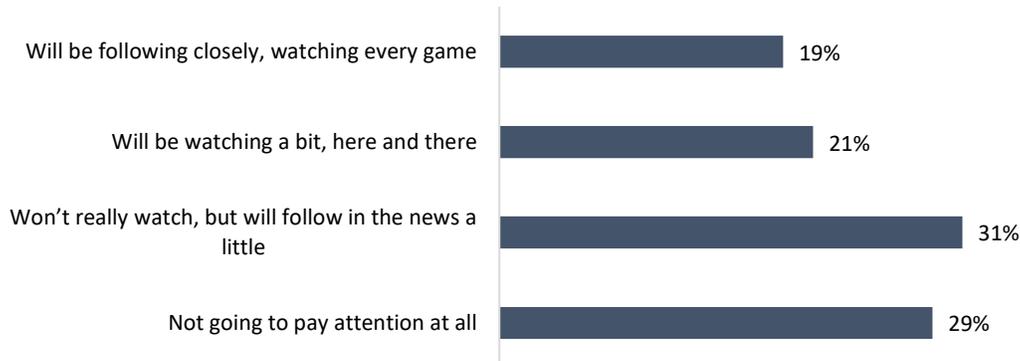
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**Percentage of Canadians who follow each league closely:
(All Respondents, n=1500)**



To understand the seismic shift in attention during this playoff run, consider the number of Canadians who are now following the NBA Finals. One-in-five (19%) say they are locked into this series, watching every game, while another one-in-five (21%) are more passive viewers and will be tuning in but not necessarily building their schedule around the series. Another three-in-ten (31%) have some interest but will mostly be checking in here and there.

**How closely, if at all, will you be following this championship series?
(All respondents)**



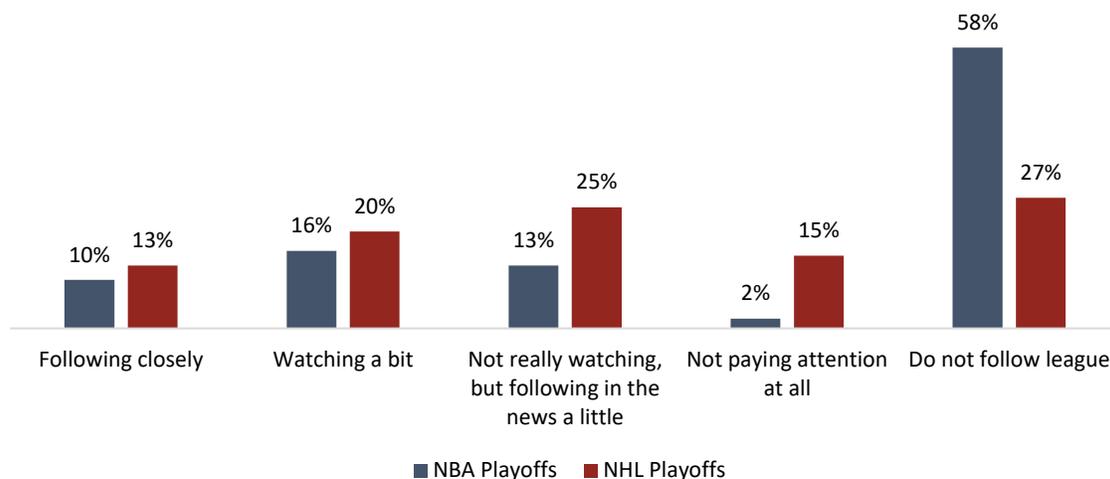
Did viewers shift from hockey to basketball?

“Stadium packed, just glad to see the city on the map” – Drake, Wu-Tang Forever

One of the most interesting elements of this spring has been the relative success and failure of Canadian teams in the largely concurrent NBA and NHL playoffs. All three of the Canadian NHL franchises that qualified for the Stanley Cup Playoffs were eliminated in the first round. And while this has been devastating to [viewership for the NHL](#) in Canada, the Raptors have picked up some of the slack.

In terms of raw attention, the NHL started with a vastly larger pool of potential viewers, as just 27 per cent of Canadians say they completely ignore the NHL, compared to twice that number - 58 per cent - when it comes to the NBA. Evidently, the lack of Canadian content has reduced the percentage who are following. Close to the same number say they have been following the NBA (10%) and NHL (13%) playoffs since each started in the second week of April. The percentage of potential fans who have checked out is significantly higher for the NHL:

**Percentage of Canadians following each playoffs
(All respondents, n=1,500)**



The [viewership numbers](#) for each championship series help to drive home this point. In Canada, game one of the Stanley Cup Finals between the Boston Bruins and St. Louis Blues averaged 1.8 million viewers in Canada, close to half of the 3.3 million average that game one of Toronto versus Golden State generated. The series opener was the most watched NBA game in the country’s history, [peaking at 7.4 million, or about one-fifth](#) of the nation’s population.

For the NHL, the story is in the elimination of the Calgary Flames, Winnipeg Jets and Toronto Maple Leafs so early on. Among those who follow the NHL, only one-quarter (25%) say they have continued watching as much as they would have with Canadian teams playing, while one-in-five (18%) have stopped watching entirely.

Did the three Canadian teams being eliminated affect the way that you have watched the playoffs after the first round? (Among hockey playoff watchers, n=867)								
	Total (867)	Region (Note, some sample sizes are small and should be interpreted with caution)						
		BC (103)	AB (96)	SK (66)	MB (69)	ON (266)	QC (204)	ATL (75)
Yes, watched a bit less than I would have	15%	13%	18%	9%	14%	18%	13%	13%
Yes, watched way less hockey	27%	29%	26%	31%	30%	33%	18%	24%
Yes, stopped watching entirely	18%	13%	25%	13%	33%	22%	13%	11%
No, kept watching as much as I would have	25%	31%	23%	34%	22%	16%	34%	35%
No, wouldn't have watched anyway	14%	15%	8%	14%	2%	12%	22%	17%

Generation, gender, drive preference between NBA Finals and Stanley Cup Finals

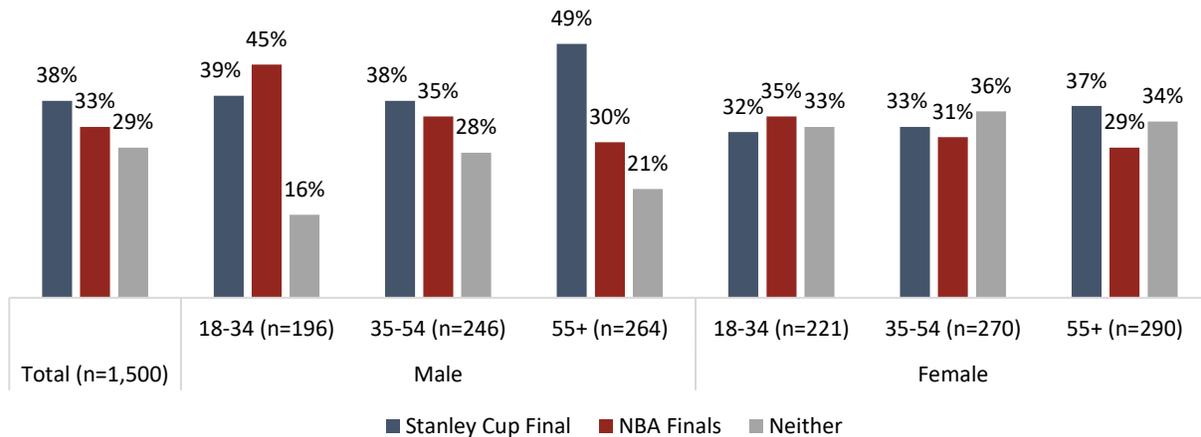
“I thought I could have it all, do I really gotta choose?” – Drake, Sooner than Later

Fortunately for Canadian sports fans, they do not have to choose between watching the Finals for either the NBA or the NHL. The leagues have engineered their schedules to avoid any conflict that may hamper viewership. But what if they did have to choose?

The Angus Reid Institute asked all respondents, if they had to choose either the NBA Finals with Toronto representing Canada, or the Stanley Cup Finals—with two American teams, the St. Louis Blues and Boston Bruins—which one they would opt for. The results show a nation divided.

Nearly equal numbers say they would watch the NHL (38%) or the NBA (33%), while a significant number have no interest in either (29%). These proportions are steady across all of the female age cohorts, but young men prefer the NBA, while men 55-and-older lean toward the NHL:

If you could only choose one series to watch, would you rather watch the NBA Finals or the Stanley Cup hockey finals?



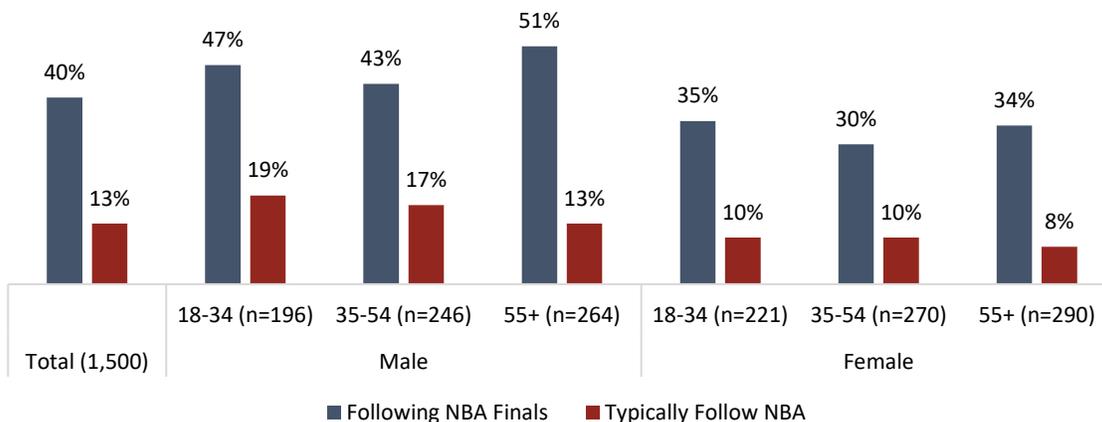
Anatomy of a Bandwagon

“The bandwagon’s full but you can try and run behind it” – Drake, Thank Me Now

The Toronto Raptors have certainly benefitted from disaffected hockey fans, left to fill time in their evening schedules. One of the other aspects of their viewership is the non-traditional fans the team has inspired. While young men have been disproportionately interested in the team in recent years, the rest of the population has been catching up as they squeeze onto the Raptors bandwagon.

The increase in attention among female viewers compared to previous levels are at least three-fold across each age group. However, it’s older men (55+) who have increased their engagement by the largest ratio, four-fold:

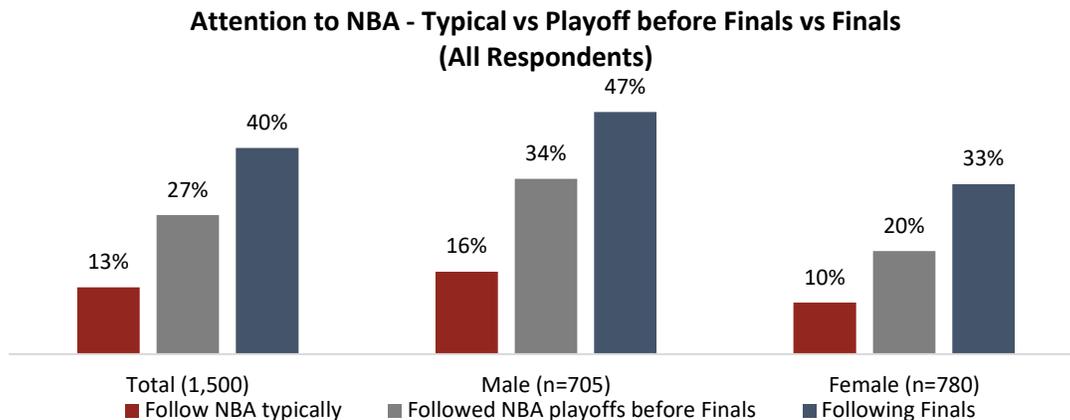
Percentage following NBA finals vs Typically follow NBA (All respondents)



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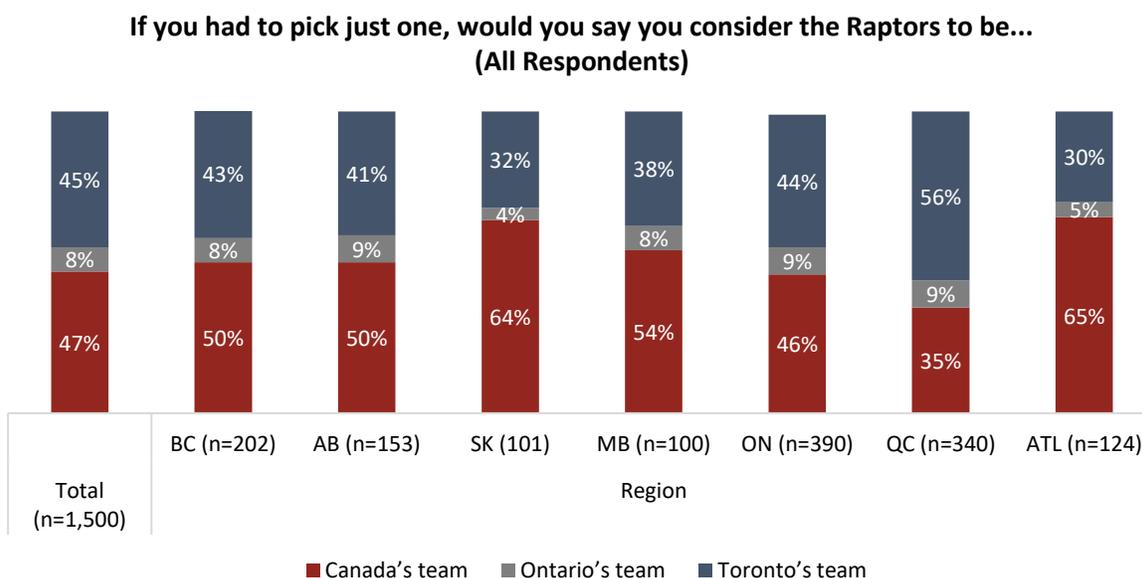
The proportion of Canadians tuning in for the broadcast each game night has grown as the Raptors have piled up victories. While just 13 per cent of Canadians follow the NBA year-to-year, this has doubled (to 27%) when the playoffs started and has grown to two-in-five (40%) for the Finals series against Golden State. Attention has tripled among both men and women.



Regional division over #WeTheNorth

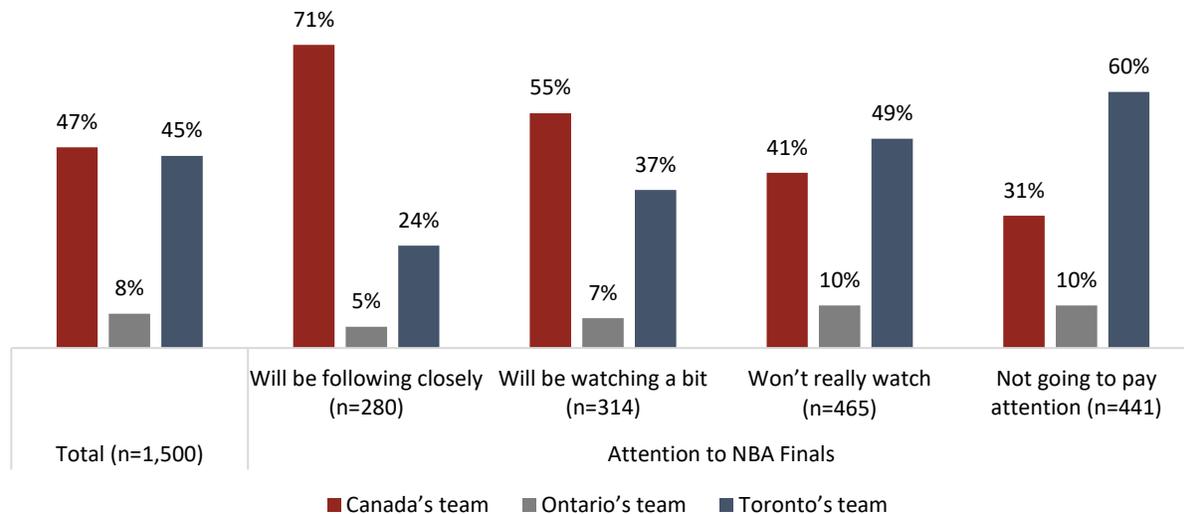
“Guess whose it is? Guess whose it is? It’s yours” – Drake, Own It

The nation’s sports fans have been focused on Toronto in recent weeks, but many Canadians, including a significant proportion of Ontario residents, say the Raptors are indeed Canada’s team. That said, equal numbers say the team is primarily Toronto’s to claim. Quebec residents are the least likely to claim a portion of the team for themselves – just 35 per cent say the Raps are Canada’s team, whereas nearly twice as many Atlantic Canadians say this is the case.



Interestingly, those who are less inclined to watch the games are more inclined to say the Raptors are primarily Toronto’s team. Among those who are following closely, the overwhelming sense is that the team is Canada’s to share this spring:

**If you had to pick just one, would you say you consider the Raptors to be...
(All Respondents)**



Can Toronto win the series?

“My whole team winnin’, we don’t play your game” – Drake, Skepta Interlude

Canadians are bullish about the Raptors chances. One-in-five (18%) say they expect Toronto to win the series, though this rises to 29 per cent among Super Fans and 31 per cent among those following the finals closely.

While the betting odds have favoured the Warriors, the majority of Canadians, and all levels of fans, say they consider the series to be about 50/50 for each team. Almost no one believes that Toronto has no chance to take home the [Larry O’Brien Championship Trophy](#).

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And what odds would you give the Raptors of winning this series against Golden State?

	Total paying any attention to NBA Finals (1,059)	Level of Attention Paid to NBA			
		Super Fan, always follows NBA Closely (184)	Following Finals Closely (280)	Following Finals a Bit (314)	Just checking in on Finals (465)
A very good chance – I expect them to win the series	18%	29%	31%	21%	9%
A decent chance, about 50/50	58%	58%	59%	65%	52%
Not much of a chance – it's going to be tough for them	9%	11%	8%	7%	11%
No chance at all	0%	1%	0%	0%	1%
Not sure/Will wait to see	14%	1%	2%	6%	27%

And is Drake bad luck?

“Blew up and I’m in the city still” – Drake, Still Here

The battle for biggest Raptor fan has heated up these playoffs, with homegrown superstar rapper Drake and [Superfan Nav Bhatia](#), a long time Ontario resident and Indian immigrant, both garnering their share of headlines and attention—Drake, for his ongoing sideline antics, and Nav, for his unparalleled commitment to the team (he hasn’t missed a game in 24 years).

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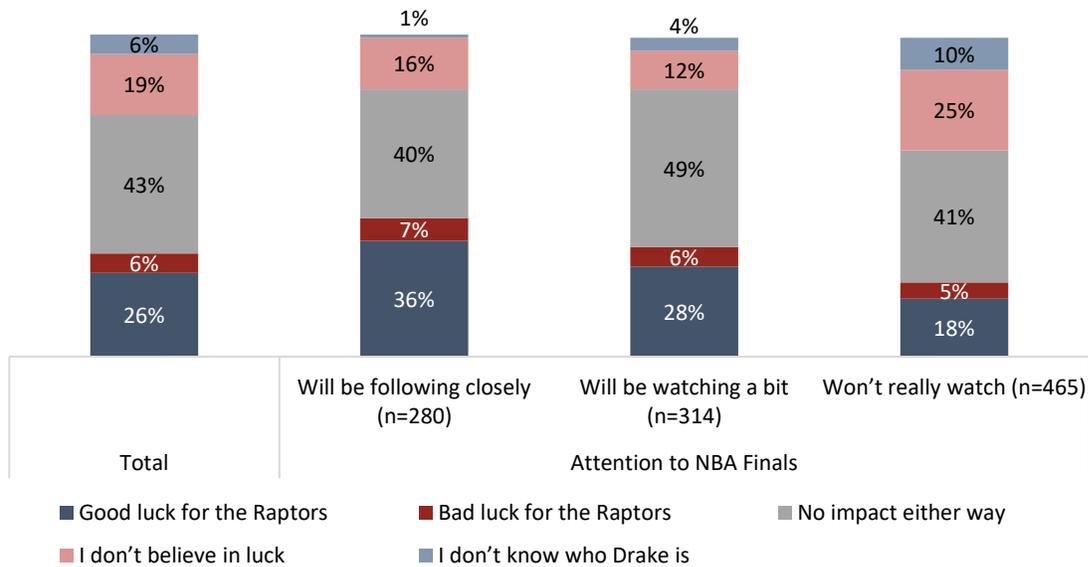


Nav may have the upper hand, as the [so-called Drake Curse](#) purportedly claims more victims, including soccer teams, basketball teams, martial artists and now-former heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua. Joshua posted a [picture with Drake](#) to his Instagram account on March 21 with the caption “Bout to break the curse.” Last Saturday he lost for the first time in his professional career to massive underdog challenger Andy Ruiz, Jr.

But is Drake bad luck for the Raptors? Most Canadians don't think so. In fact, they're approximately four-times more likely to say that he's good luck (26%) rather than bad (6%). Further, the largest group (43%) say he isn't having an impact either way. Perhaps this is because he cheers for Toronto but has openly also [supported the Golden State Warriors](#) in recent years.

Those following the NBA Finals most closely are more inclined to believe that the [world's most streamed artist](#) is indeed a good luck charm:

Based on what you may have seen, read or heard about Drake's presence at the games, in your own opinion, is he ...



For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, click [here](#).

For detailed results by level of attention to the NBA and NHL, click [here](#).