"You play and do the best job that you can," head coach Alvin Gentry said after the team's fifth straight loss.

"No is going to quit."

Those are the words of a desperate leader searching for hope, and in the absence of a clear winning formula he resorts to platitudes and promises designed to engender faith.

But faith is dwindling. At the moment, the Phoenix Suns sit at 7-13 on the young season after 20 games. You get an idea of your team after 20 games, and my idea is that these Suns are not on an upward trajectory.

Is there a sense of frustration in the clubhouse?

"There's not a sense," Luis Scola said after the Dallas loss. "It's frustration. Pure frustration. Its not a sense. We are losing. We lost five games in a row. We are just playing bad. There's frustration."

In those five consecutive losses, the Suns had a chance to tie or take the lead in the final seconds of four of them. Three of those shot attempts were layups. One could take those missed layups as evidence that the team is okay, and that shots like those even out over the course of a season.

The Suns have played 11 of their first 20 on the road, a tough task for a young team with a lot of new faces. One could point to the road-heavy schedule as evidence that the team could turn it

around with more home games.

But let's pull back the layers a little further.

The Suns have played what amounts to the second-easiest schedule in the league , in terms of opponents' winning percentage to date. Against teams who currently have a winning record (won more than they lost), the Suns are 0-8. Against teams who currently have a losing record, the Suns are 7-5.

During this second-easiest slate of games, the Suns have managed to find themselves down by at least 10 points in 16 of 20 games. I have not done the research to compare to other teams in other seasons, but on the surface this appears to be a bad trend.

"When you are down 15, 16, 19, 27 points, you are going to lose the majority of those games," Scola says wisely (*paraphrased from several post-game comments on the topic*).

The Suns are 29th in the league in defensive efficiency (points allowed per possession) and dead last in total points allowed per game. They allow a league-leading 3-point shooting percentage against them.

That the Suns have only played eight winning teams in 20 games is fortunate and unusual, and about to end. The Suns are entering a very tough stretch of games in December and January - a whopping 19 of their next 26 opponents could have a winning record when they face the Suns.

Oy.

"No is going to quit."

Of course, the coach says this. What choice does Alvin Gentry have here? His job is to win games, so he is going to prod and poke his guys into playing the best basketball they can possibly play.

His job is to get them to ignore the results and play each minute like it's their last. And if guys do quit, they lose their spot in the rotation. Wake up, Marcin. This is your career in the balance here. Same to you, Michael.

The Suns players cannot be worried about winning records, losing records and playoff positioning. They can only worry about today's game, and how can they win their individual matchup.

Gentry can only coach the players he has and try to get them to do the right thing at the right time.

"Disappointed in our ball movement," he said regarding the offense. "When we passed it 1-2 times, shooting was 33%, more than that = 68%."

What about defense, Alvin?

"We gotta do a better job of controlling the dribble penetration."

The Suns have to focus on a few things they can correct with better scheming and coaching. These guys are not going to win games by themselves. The coaching staff has to play matchups and schemes.

Starting today, on the road in Los Angeles against the Clippers , start focusing on small improvements. Focus on player development, but not to the detriment of the team.

But don't lambast Gentry for trying to win games. That's his job, and it's the only job he has.

Don't tell him to play his youngest players the most minutes - that's career suicide for him and morale killing to the team. As long as he has veterans playing better than his kids, he is going to play those veterans. It's up to the kids to win those rotation minutes.

"As quickly as things are going poorly," he said, trying to stay positive. "You can also turn it around. Right now, our goal is to keep playing and turn our season around."

Keep the faith, Alvin.