

Phoenix Suns Defense: BREAKING BAD

Written by

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Watching every single defensive possession during the [Phoenix Suns](#) recent seven game skid has put suicidal murderous thoughts into my head. I am not sure about waterboarding as an effective or ethical method to extract sensitive information, yet I am absolutely positive that forcing our enemies to watch the Suns during this stretch would yield massive amounts of espionage gold!

Over the past few weeks, I have been logging torturous late night hours reviewing every single defensive possession in order to develop a deeper statistical method to measure our defensive aptitude [or lack thereof]. It is a monumental task that is taking so long that I have decided to move forward with my conclusions without tabulating all of the results, mostly because the conclusions that have surfaced are palpable and to spend additional time when the obvious must be stated would be both tiresome and criminal [and my wife is getting mad at at me].

The Suns Suck!

Ok, that is a complete oversimplification, but I had to get it off my chest.

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As someone who has coached over 500 games in my career [and over 1500 practices], I have seen many possessions of basketball with many players of differing ability and IQ. It has become second nature for me to quickly assess and understand the root of any particular problem that occurs during any given possession, as it is my responsibility to quickly correct whatever is going wrong. I know firsthand that you can cover strategy in your practice until you are blue in the face, only to have the players go out and do something completely contrary to what you are teaching. It happens. Yet there are times when enough possessions are performed in a specific way to conclude that the players are being coached to play that way. There are even times when there is absolutely no consistency in how those situations play out, which might indicate a complete lack of coaching [see Mike D'Antoni].

In the Suns case, there are some maddening trends that make it all too clear that [Alvin Gentry](#) and his staff lack a clear and concise defensive strategy.

While offense and defense flow together and are deeply intertwined, for this exercise I focused on the end of the floor that I believe should be consistent and keep you competitive in every game regardless of whether shots are falling. For years we have been spoiled with an overabundance of offensive firepower, yet our defense has always been suspect and pointed to as the stumbling block to any sort of real success [championship].

Yes, great offense is fun. However winning championships is more fun than that. The bottom line is that we want the Suns to compete in every game and every possession. I would be fine with losing a game because our offense wasn't there, if we were competitive on the other end of the floor. In fact, during this skid, there were times when that was the case [Memphis]. Unfortunately there are too many where it isn't.

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To the tape!

Here is an interesting fact. On quick glance, opponents have run a Pick-and-Roll [PNR] to instigate offense on about 50% of their possessions. The other main offense used is what I would call dribble penetration/iso plays, accounting for 20% of all possessions. The remaining offense initiators are post play [10%], curls/picks or other sets [7%], and plays off transition [8%], and other [7% - such as offensive rebounds or broken plays].

This means that the bulk of defending requires the Suns to deal with pick and roll possessions and dribble penetration off of isolation play [guarding your man]. Yet isolation plays are the result of both quality one-on-one moves [like [Rudy Gay](#) , [Dion Waiters](#) or [Rodney Stuckey](#) put on us] and plays as a result of scrambling and forcing shots up. So the real offensive mainstay any team needs to deal with is the pick and roll. A team that can stop the PNR half the time is going to automatically drop an opposing teams scoring opportunity by 25% [don't hold me to that, but it is my educated estimate that if you stop half of the possessions that make up half of the possessions, it equals 25%].

What is completely obvious by watching the Suns guard pick and roll plays is that they far too often get beat [or another way of more accurately stating it – far too few times do they get stops]. What is less obvious are the culprits for this ineptitude.

Many have pondered that our guards/wings have played inferior perimeter defense, allowing opposing guards/wings to light them up. After watching every PNR possession, that conclusion would be flat out wrong.

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The main culprits for the defensive breakdowns are our bigs [more specifically the man guarding the picker] and to a lesser extent, the other players responsible for rotating [more on that later].

The typical play has the opposing big setting a screen on Dragic [or someone else], finding our big [Gortat usually] stepping sideways [or back] in a "sag" position readying himself to attempt to guard the ball handler as that player gets a head of steam and attacks [or conversely pulls up for an unmolested jumper].

One can hardly blame Dragic for being steamrolled by a pick. In fact, on many possessions, our guard attempts to break through the picks and stay with the play. Yet time and again, the opponent is getting deep into the lane and either getting to the rim or collapsing our defense in lieu of a wide open perimeter shot, thus giving up a league leading amount of threes.

Obviously some will point to the "pick your poison" argument, stating that everyone in the league has this issue and you have to decide which way you want to play things.

Yet the issue with the Suns is that there doesn't seem to be any specific plan for how to handle the PNR, and even worse, within any given possession when they decide to play any certain way, there is a complete lack of communication between the players directly involved in the PNR and the other "rotation" guys [meaning if they sag, nobody should be helping, and conversely if they trap, everybody should be helping]. In addition, there are far too many possessions where they simply are making a half-hearted effort.

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Evidence of this fact are the possessions where the Suns actually perform PNR defense to a pleasurable result. Usually the player involved with guarding the PNR with aplomb is Luis Scola. While at times, all of our other bigs have hedged nicely, Scola is the most consistent "hedger", often trapping the ball hard to measurably positive results.

One thing is for sure – when we trap hard, or even hedge hard [where it forces the ball handler to change direction or impedes his ability to get a head of steam], our defensive possession results in a "stop" more than 80% of the time. When we sag off the PNR, the numbers reverse. **WOW! REMEMBER THAT!**

There are two things that stand out to me. The first is the coaching staff clearly does not properly communicate a consistent and concise strategy to guard the PNR. It is entirely possible that they do not have a strategy. Yet they are paying a guy on staff to be the "defensive" coach only to have players playing this play incorrectly.

The second is that our players are lazy. The latter speaks for itself [giving up on plays, staring down the strong side while someone comes weakside to outposition us, half-hearted attempts to break through picks or close out on players, and not hustling for loose balls].

The former is much more complicated. Look, there are always situations that dictate you switch up how you play based on who you are playing. If an opposing point guard is a terrible outside shooter, you may tell your player to go under every screen and tell your big to either "hug" their man on the pick [closing the space between them so the guard can go around], or to sag allowing enough space for your guard to break through the pick. If someone is a great shooter, you do it differently. You can pick your poison and decide to let teams shoot over you, settling for the odds that shooting decreases as the game wears on. There are many different strategies and none are entirely right or wrong.

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Hedging hard or even trapping the PNR can have its negatives; players are forced to make more effort thus tiring out, and there is the real possibility of getting your big in foul trouble. You also have the problem when you face a masterful point guard who can either split the hedge or sees the open floor well enough to find quick outlets putting your other defenders in scramble rotations. All of this is valid arguments against playing this way versus some teams [although I would argue that list of teams is limited].

Yet what is clear from the data is that the benefits of hard hedging/trapping outweigh the negatives. Looking at per possession numbers for pick and roll plays [during this losing streak], **the Suns have hedged hard approximately 22% of PNR possessions, sagging the remaining 78%**

[remember that 50% of the defensive possessions are PNR plays].

Of the plays where they have chosen to sag, the Suns have stopped on only 13% of those possessions [meaning the play resulted in no score for the opposing team].

Conversely, on PNR plays where they have hedged or trapped hard, the Suns have stopped their opponent on 80% of those possessions. While those numbers might skew slightly as the number of possessions of hedging increase, it is a staggering statistic. The data clearly shows that hedging hard [and occasionally trapping] increases your odds of stopping your opponent dramatically.

Why is this?

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First, hedging hard forces the ball handler to take extra dribbles in the "wrong direction", slowing his progress to the rim [or deterring it completely]. This allows the other defenders time to locate and rotate to the correct areas for help, as well as drains time off the shot clock. Many times it requires the ball handler to reset the pick, taking even more time, which creates broken plays and hurried shots at the end of the clock.

Hedging also forces the ball handler to make a longer pass, usually a skip pass, as the rotation defenders should be cutting off the closer immediate pass to the roll man. This type of pass usually takes enough time to allow the other defenders to rotate and properly close out on the play. It also gets the ball out of the prime decision maker's hands and into the hands of guys you generally don't want making plays [unless that guy is a LeBron, Durant or a Kobe]. Again, time comes off the shot clock and the play tends to break down at that point, forcing a player to iso create against the set defense [a low probability of success].

Forcing teams to dribble and pass around the exterior of the floor significantly increases the probability that your defense will get a stop.

Play after play watching Gortat sag off the PNR like a hockey goalie waiting for a blocked shot is excruciating. Is it because Gortat is lazy? Is it because he doesn't want to exert the effort? Is it him wanting to pad his block stats? Or is it a result of not knowing what to do and when? What is the case for the other Suns bigs?

I believe it is a combination of factors. While Luis Scola tends to hedge hard on every play, I believe that is a result of playing for another coach [[Rick Adelman](#)] who grilled it into his head and it has now become habit.

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For the rest of the players, their habits are not being dealt with, nor are they being told what to do in a consistent fashion. In fact, I would contend that the coaching staff is simply not sure what to tell them.

The latest grumblings from the Suns seems to lean toward disbelief in the poor performance and some belief that there are no answers.

Bull.

The answers are pretty clear:

1] While we suffer from not having a go-to scorer, and everyone on the planet seems to want to commiserate over that fact, it isn't our biggest issue. Our biggest issue is that we cannot compete consistently because we cannot defend consistently. Yes, having a good offense helps [and I am not completely discounting offensive prowess as something that would be helpful], but we need a better defense more than we need a better offense at this point.

Playing defensive minded [and able] players does a few of things: [1] it increases the intensity of play, which by itself increases our ability to compete; and [2] it allows us to consistently be in games when our offense is not clicking; and [3] it gives us the opportunity to win close games in the end by getting us crucial stops.

It is time to sit Brown, Beasley, Morris and Gortat [or at least limit their play until they buy-in].

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While some of you might vociferously question inclusion of Gortat, and even Morris, my observation of over 700 defensive possessions has provided me clarity. The two worst defenders on this team are not Beasley or Brown. It is easily Markieff Morris followed by Gortat.

Stat wise, Morris has a team worst defensive rating of 114.9, Gortat is fourth worst at 109.4, [Beasley 113.9, Brown 111.9]. Yet it is in results of possessions not recorded by any particular stat where it is clear that these two are failing.

Yes Gortat blocks a lot of shots, yet many of those come on baseline drives or putbacks off offensive rebounds. Few of those blocks are a result of great defensive position and hustle.

I will admit early on he was blocking many drives, but he was the main cause of allowing those players to get all the way to the rim in the first place, by sagging on PNR plays and allowing opposing guards to gain a head of steam and require Gortat to recover by blocking shots. Essentially he is making up for his mistake, but he doesn't do it enough to make up for all of the mistakes he makes.

Gortat's main failure is his complete inability to consistently hedge on PNR plays, and recover fast enough to stay in solid defensive position. For him, I see it as a lack of consistent effort and aggressive play. On the positive, I do think that Gortat, with a clear directive, can change his strategy to be more effective and get off this list. Yet his lack of energy at times is simply deplorable for someone who called everyone out in the media. . At this point, bench him in favor of O'Neal [who by the way has a team best defensive rating of 92.5] until he starts buying in.

In regards to Morris, although we all like his promise, he is a horrid defender. Too many possessions have him playing incredibly soft, standing and watching the ball only to have guys cut behind or in front of him for a play. He too does not make the effort necessary for consistent

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play on the defensive end. I watched it first hand and was shocked how many times I would get pissed at Morris for his lack of effort. It was at least equal to the amount of times for Brown.

As for Brown and Beasley, both are putrid defenders. Brown will occasionally exert glimpses of defense, only to ruin them with overplaying lanes and getting out of position, or simply ball watching and allowing guys to set up for wide open shots [wow, just like his offense]. The problem with Brown is that he will linger in the middle of the court, half-heartedly playing "help" defense when no help is needed, only to leave his man for wide open threes. Despite his occasional ability to score, I would prefer to have Dudley or Tucker on the floor, or even move Dragic to the 2.

Beasley is simply lost. He plays about every 12th play on defense. I am not sure anything can be done for him.

It is time to sit them and go with guys that are going to make effort!

2] Hedge and trap every pick and roll. Send the opposite big to cut the "roll" man off, and cut off all short passes. You will get split sometimes and sometimes you will have fouls issues, but the data is clear. This is a clear strategy. Of course if you need to tweak it in game, do so then. But as a course of action, have an actual strategy and implement it with the correct players.

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3] Get the ball out of everyone else's hands and **let Dragic command the offense**. I know this is not defense related, but it is the case. Gentry is losing Dragic. Goran's frustration is evident and it stems from the fact that he is tasked with saving this team from itself, yet the effort is not rewarded. If you don't give him the keys, he will eventually quit on us, and I think you are starting to see his defensive intensity fall.

4] Despite #3 above, we need to use post play as an offense initiator more, and stop with the high post entries. The fact is, we have shooters on this team. We also have two guys that do have post skills that draw double teams. Right now in the NBA, teams haven't focused on guarding this [thus why post plays make up only 10% of possessions]. Drawing doubles gets Brown, Dudley, Morris, Scola and Dragic open looks. Mix this into our repertoire more often and ditch the 1-4 high offense. It isn't working unless you are going to duck the opposing big into the block and pass down low from the high post entry. Just dribble to a side and post up Scola and O'Neal on occasion, would you?

5] I don't get involved with the hiring and firing of coaches, but light a fire under someone there to start demanding more. Our effort is lax.

I will continue to log my defensive entries and develop more stats as I get more time. I apologize for not being able to provide those numbers, but I wanted to get this out in a timely fashion.