

Phoenix Suns attendance at all-time low for US Airways Arena

Written by

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For those who have been to [Phoenix Suns](#) games this season it's so surprise to learn that, yes, attendance is down from last year.

The team lacks a supernova star to attract fans just on the chance to watch him play live. Michael Jordan once said that [Steve Nash](#) was one of the few NBA players he would pay to watch take the court. The Suns don't have anyone like Steve Nash.

Nor is the team in a market flush with disposable income, such as Los Angeles or New York. Even when the [Knicks](#) featured a terrible team for several years there in the 2000s, they still filled up 99+% of their seats every night. Same goes for Chicago. The

[Bulls](#)

were really bad for a long time between Jordan and Rose, yet their arena was always full.

A team without stars in a middling market is going to struggle. Phoenix has always been a middling market that couldn't keep up with the big boys ticket sales.

While they sold out the arena regularly during the golden Barkley/KJ/Chambers years and again during the early Nash/Stoudemire/Marion years in the mid-2000s, those sellouts [never got the Suns higher than 10th in the league](#)

. In fact, they have always drawn more fans on the road than at home, including this year.

Moving into US Airways Arena in 1992 (then called America West Arena) added thousands more seats than the old *Madhouse on McDowell* offered. Veteran's Memorial Coliseum, now host to state fair events and still ringed with orange seats, offered less than 15,000 seats. The pre-Barkley Suns [never topped 15,000 fans per game](#)

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At US Airways arena, the previous low-water mark in attendance occurred at the tail end of the Colangelos' reign, a mere decade after the brand spanking new arena opened. Over the three-season span from 2001-2004, the Suns averaged just over 16,300 fans per game. A far cry from 6 straight 19,023 sellout seasons in the Barkley years.

When Steve Nash returned and Robert Sarver's group bought the team, the good days returned. Attendance jumped back into 99+% capacity, though as stated above never better than 10th in the league. US Airways just doesn't have the capacity that other stadiums enjoy.

Great attendance lasted until last season, when the Suns failed to top the 16,000-per-game mark and is on an even worse pace this season.

The Suns business office is holding out hope for a better tomorrow.

"Though year-over-year attendance numbers are slightly lower at this point," said a Suns spokesperson. "It is still very early and we anticipate that those numbers will increase as we head further into the season, as is often the case."

Despite a poor record and a 9-game losing streak, the Valley is still stricken with Cardinal fever and will be until early January. The NFL is the elephant in the room. ABC doesn't even show NBA games until Christmas because they know that fans won't watch if there's an NFL game near it.

The Suns also cite the turnover in players affecting fan excitement levels.

"Between our fans continuing to become more familiar with our players," they continued. "And the NBA becoming more relevant after the New Year, we believe we will see a positive trend in attendance heading into the later part of our season."

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True enough. Attendance will rise, as long as the Suns are in the playoff hunt. And heck, probably even if they aren't. The Suns had higher ticket sales during a 29-53 season in 2003-04 than they do today. America notices the NBA in the spring. That's just the way it's always been.

But that doesn't mean the Suns are doing well, by any stretch. You can surmise that all, or at least most, NBA markets are afflicted with the NFL virus. So, the Suns relative ranking with it's peers still means that fans are down on the Suns.

The Suns currently sit at [24th in the league in per-game attendance](#) (which includes all sold season tickets) with 14,660 seats sold per night, or just under 80% of the arena. This relative position is down from 21st last season.

Again, I remind you dear readers that the Suns never ranked higher than 10th in peer rankings, even when selling every single ticket in the arena. Bigger markets have built bigger arenas.

It does not help that the Suns fail to offer any ticket-selling stars. That doesn't necessarily equate to ticket sales, though it doesn't hurt. The bottom 10 teams in ticket sales are also the bottom 10 teams in transcendent talent.

National TV games are a big attendance boost - fans must think they will be on TV? - even for small markets. But the networks don't want to show off a small market if the TV audience isn't engaged, and if there's no superstar to highlight. It's all about ratings, folks.

And offering big stars doesn't necessarily promise big attendance figures if the market is tiny. The [Grizzlies](#), despite being one of the best teams in the West the last few years, only come in at 19th amongst their peers in attendance this season, and 20th last season - just squeaking ahead of the struggling Suns.

The Suns timed their "Satisfaction Guaranteed Night" with their only nationally-covered game to date - a Thursday-nighter against Dallas - to nearly fill the stadium. Attendance certainly passed the eye test. Nearly every seat appeared taken.

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The Suns have five more nationally-covered games coming up this season, a far cry from the 25-33 national games a year the Suns enjoyed in recent seasons with Nash at the helm.

Will the Suns guarantee satisfaction at those games too?

"The Satisfaction Guaranteed Night was a big success," the Suns tell me. "And was based on that same idea of offering fans an opportunity to familiarize themselves with what is still a fairly new Suns team. We will continue to keep open the option of additional promotions, but have nothing planned at this time."

We'll see how the rest of the season pans out, but it's not starting well. No matter how you slice and dice it, attendance has never been this low in this arena.

The Suns cannot do anything about market size, but they can do something about the product they put on the court.

If the Suns keep winning, attendance will rise a bit. If the Suns are fighting for a playoff chance in March and April, the arena will be full.

But if they don't acquire some kind of superstar to replace what Steve Nash brought, and Charles Barkley before him, the Suns won't be selling out any more full seasons again.