

Game Preview: Utah Jazz (16-17) at Phoenix Suns (12-21), 7pm AZ Time

Written by
Friday, 04 January 2013 13:00 -



Talk about a tossup. Despite disparate rosters, the [Suns](#) and [Jazz](#) are very similar teams - unsure whether to totally tank and go young vs. winning games now.

Just Win, Baby

The Phoenix Suns are looking for their 2,000th win as a franchise tonight.

And as long as the Suns win another game sometime in the next FOUR SEASONS, only three other franchises will have needed fewer games to reach that 2,000-win mark (Celtics, Lakers, 76ers).

But it's not all roses. The fourth-winningest franchise in NBA history - 55% winning percentage as a franchise - is on track for their third straight losing season.

Win now or later?

The Jazz are stuck between "win now" mode with C Al Jefferson and PF Paul Millsap and "win later" mode with their talented backups Derrick Favors and Enes Kanter. For the last 1.5 seasons, it's been "win now" at the expense of player development, as Big Al and Millsap have gotten the bulk of the minutes. But that has only made the Jazz a fringe playoff team with no chance to contend.

Sound familiar? The Suns, for now, are still trying to win games with veterans like Marcin Gortat and [Luis Scola](#) along the front line this season and [Steve Nash](#) and [Grant Hill](#) on the perimeter a year ago. The Suns' success rate has been slightly worse than the Jazz, but only by a fraction.

Both teams are struggling of late. The Suns have lost 13 of 18 games, while the Jazz have lost

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8 of their last 11. Neither team is in playoff position, were the season to end today.

At what point do you punt the season? That decision likely comes sometime in the next three weeks, but not quite yet. The season is still early and tickets must be sold.

Home cooking is always better

Both team can win at home. The Jazz are 10-4 at home (vs. 6-13 on the road), while the Suns are 10-7 at home (vs. 2-13 on the road).

The Suns have the upper hand tonight.

Battle at the Point

Contributing to the recent Jazz swoon is the loss of starting PG Mo Williams for several weeks. Williams provides 12.9 points and 6.7 assists per game, setting up the Jazz offense that features a lot of points in the paint.

In his place, the once-banished Jamal Tinsley has contributed 7 points and 6.6 assists in 9 starts (29.6 minutes per game) this season. Yet that doesn't mean the Suns can relax. Far from it. Tinsley was the key to the Jazz win over the Suns early this season. He started and dished 14 assists (vs. 0 points) in the 94-81 Jazz win, one of four games this year that Tinsley has dished 11+ assists.

[Goran Dragic](#) has had an up and down season, as described today by our own Jacob Padilla. If he plays well, the Suns play well. But in the two Jazz games, Dragic was helped or hurt by his starting mates more than anything he did. In the early loss to the Jazz, Dragic had 13 points and 6 assists but the Suns were -20 on the scoreboard in the minutes he took the floor. In the Suns December win, Dragic was a +22 with 17 points and 5 assists.

More specifics on those mates in a minute.

'Did you know?' on Dragic/Tinsley

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Tinsley was one of the first to bring out The Dragon in the young Slovenian point guard. When Dragic was a timid young player (dubbed worst player in the NBA by ESPN's John Hollinger), Tinsley once dribbled the ball between Goran's legs on his way to the basket. Quite embarrassing. But instead of retreating further into his shell, the Dragon arrived. Dragic did the exact same thing back to Tinsley on the other end of the court, dribbling between Tinsley's legs on a drive to the hole. To my knowledge, I've never seen Dragic dribble the ball between anyone else's legs since.

That act of retaliation - along with trying to block Rose's breakaway jam and re-stealing balls that had been taken from him - were the first signs of a long NBA career that was iffy until 2010.

Power Forward Conundrum

Another interesting matchup occurs on the front line. In the Jazz win, Luis Scola got the bulk of the PF minutes next to Marcin Gortat. He scored points, but appeared overmatched against the Jazz duo of Paul Millsap and Derrick Favors' athleticism.

When the second game began in the same way (with Scola looking slow compared to the Jazz), Gentry benched Scola. [Markieff Morris](#) and [Michael Beasley](#) shared most of the PF minutes and contributed a solid game against Millsap and Favors by playing smaller and quicker.

With Scola on a scoring rampage once again (three straight 20+ point outings), it will be interesting to see how long the leash before Gentry goes with what won the last game at Scola's expense.

But it's all about the Polish Machine

It appears that [Marcin Gortat's](#) psyche is directly correlated with how he fares against Al Jefferson and the athletic bigs around Big Al.

"Utah is my little nightmare," he says.

Gortat was horrendous in a late-season, playoff-deciding matchup last spring and again this fall

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after playing well up that point in each case. But against the Jazz in April and November (and the start of the December game), he made only 2 of 17 shots with at least 8 of them blocked over 2+ games.

But Gortat seemed to re-awaken in the December game after going through a terrible slump leading up to it. He came with good energy and ended up with 12 points and 14 rebounds in the Suns win.

Before the early loss to Utah this season, Gortat pumped in 15 points, 11 rebounds per game and led the league in blocks. And since that December win, he is averaging a double-double again with 12 points, 10 rebounds and 1.8 blocks per game.

But those 17 games between the early Utah loss and the later win were very forgettable. Gortat's contributions dropped across the board. He was a non-factor for nearly a month, losing time to the venerable Jermaine O'Neal and complaining to the Polish media between games. In that stretch, he provided only 10 points, 8 rebounds and 1 block per game (only three double-doubles in 17 games).

The Big Question

Which Marcin Gortat will show up tonight? The double-double machine who provides solid defense on big Al Jefferson? Or the timid shooter who gets everything blocked back in his face?

It's all about energy and attitude.

Which Marcin Gortat shows up tonight will likely influence the outcome of the game more than anything else.

Notes and Figures

- Suns are 1 game shy of 2,000 franchise wins
- Suns are the 4th-winningest team in the history of the NBA
- Suns are 5-2 against Tyrone Corbin-coached Jazz, including 3-0 in Phoenix
- Suns have won 8 of their last 10 against the Jazz

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- Suns have trailed by double digits in 24 of 33 games this season. The Suns 6-18 in those games, so it's probably not a good idea to get down 10+ points.
- All six of those comeback wins have come on their home floor.

Now for the links and Jazz stats

[Jazz vs Suns coverage](#)

[SLC Dunk](#)

FG		3PT		FT		Rebounds		
G		M		M		A		Pct
Al Jefferson	31		32.8		7.2		15.1	
Paul Millsap	32		30.1		5.2		11.0	
Gordon Hayward	32		26.7		4.2		10.0	
Mo Williams	24		31.4		5.0		11.3	
Randy Foye	32		26.2		3.7		9.2	
Derrick Favors	27		22.1		3.3		7.4	
Marvin Williams	28		25.8		3.4		7.5	
Enes Kanter	32		15.3		2.7		4.8	
DeMarre Carroll	26		17.2		2.0		4.5	
Alec Burks	17		11.3		1.8		4.8	
Jamaal Tinsley	25		20.1		1.2		3.7	
Jeremy Evans	13		6.9		0.7		1.2	
Earl Watson	17		16.3		0.7		2.7	
Kevin Murphy	3		3.0		0.7		2.0	
