

## NBA Free Agency: Is Greg Oden a good gamble for the Phoenix Suns this summer?

Written by  
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I have never been a fan of Greg Oden because he looked 52 years old. Not just in the face and his jersey number, but in his gait. The boy just didn't look right. He appeared to be an injury waiting to happen. And for \$9 million a year, he was never worth the effort.

[Michael Schwartz of Valley of the Suns points out](#), though, that this summer might be time to roll the dice on the 24-year old Oden who is three years removed from his last NBA basketball game.

Athletically talented seven-footers don't grow on trees, and All-NBA quality seven-footers come up about once or twice every generation. Greg Oden was one of those rare gems. He had everything you could want in a center, which is why he went #1 overall in the 2007 draft just ahead of [Kevin Durant](#). He could score efficiently, rebound, block shots and defend at a high level.

But then his knees turned against him. He had microfracture surgery before playing his first game, missing his entire rookie season.

He returned the next season, but injured his foot on opening night and missed another two weeks. Two months later, he chipped his kneecap in a bump with a teammate and missed three more weeks. And that was his HEALTHY season.

A month into his third NBA season, Greg Oden fractured his patella in a game and missed the rest of the season. Two weeks into his fourth NBA season, Oden had another microfracture surgery and missed the rest of the season too. He has not played an NBA game since. Several setbacks and cleanups later, Greg Oden is taking a year off of basketball just to let his body heal entirely.

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For his entire career, Greg Oden has played in 82 games, the equivalent of one season of play, at 21 and 22 years old. He was a highly efficient player, with a true shooting percentage of 61.3%, grabbing offensive and defensive rebounds like a vacuum, and defending the hoop. The Trailblazers were 9 points per game better than their opponents when he played versus only 3 points better when he sat (they were good in those days).

After "healing" [Grant Hill](#) from 5 years of ankle misery in Orlando (DPOY consideration), nursing [Steve Nash](#) through a career-threatening back condition that resulted in a series of strange mid-section ailments (2 MVPs, 5 All-Star games),

[Amare Stoudemire](#) from career-threatening knee and retina problems (All-NBA, multiple All-Star games), Shaquille O'Neal from hip and back trouble (All-Star game) and now Jermaine O'Neal from 5 years of his own knee problems (dependable backup), could the

[Phoenix Suns](#)

heal

[Greg Oden's](#)

career?

Hill and the O'Neals were much older projects, but Nash and Stoudemire were in their athletic prime at the time of their issues and Nelson's team helped them reach multiple All-Star games after recovery.

Is it possible to rebuild Greg Oden into a healthy NBA player?

Certainly, it would be Aaron Nelson's toughest job ever.

Schwartz:

When I interviewed Aaron Nelson a few years ago for my big feature on the medical staff, I asked him for his thoughts about taking on a challenge like Oden. Although he chose to answer more generally because Oden was under contract with the Blazers at the time, it was clear that he would relish such a project.

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"You always wonder, and again if you fail then it goes the other way," Nelson said. "I like challenges, and my staff likes challenges. We like to see what we can do and what we're capable of doing, and when I see injured players for other teams I feel for my peers because we're all in the same boat. The guys who are paid a lot of money and normally are playing a lot of minutes for you, when they get hurt that's a lot of pressure and a lot of stress for us and the other head athletic trainers for the other teams."

"I don't look at it and say, 'I can do better than them.' I think we're all in the same boat. I don't look at it in that perspective, I look at it as if my GM calls me and says, 'Hey, if we have this guy on our team,' then I think about it. But I don't think outside of that. If I'm watching SportsCenter and so and so has been out now for whatever I think that I feel bad for my peers that are having to deal with it because I have to deal with it when our guys get hurt, but again if our GM or owner says, 'Hey, if we're looking at Player X, do you think you can help him?' Immediately I start thinking, 'OK, yeah.'"

Portland's training staff has experienced a myriad of injuries over the years and had little success getting those guys healthy, while the Suns training staff has been remarkably effective.

Oden is just 24 years old, and would likely sign a minimum contract laden with incentives.

The more I think about it, the more I like it. It's certainly a low-risk, high-reward proposition like Hill and Jermaine O'Neal were.

While there are other great training staffs in the NBA, it's quite possible that Aaron Nelson's staff might be the only NBA training staff capable of restoring Oden to his peak.