

Phoenix Suns in sink-or-swim mode these next four months

Written by

Monday, 21 January 2013 09:34 -



Lance Blanks was hired to be the General Manager of the [Phoenix Suns](#) in August of 2010, after free agency had already defined the team for the upcoming season. His second offseason was scuttled by the lockout. His third offseason was really his first chance to make his stamp on the team.

Yet this next four months will truly define Lance Blanks' tenure with the Suns, because it's the first time he's put his own coach into position to lead his own roster of players.

When hired by the Suns in 2010, the GM position was a level higher than Blanks had ever worked. He spent years as an Assistant GM in Cleveland under Danny Ferry and Chris Grant after lesser roles for the [Spurs](#). So bringing him in 2010 without the pressure to make over the team in his first month was a blessing.

All that was left to do was fill out the back end of the roster - which he did with the likes of Garrett Siler, [Zabian Dowdell](#) and [Earl Barron](#). None of those guys developed into legitimate NBA players, but very few at the back end of a roster can make that claim anyway.

Blanks never gained full acceptance by the holdovers from the prior regime - head coach Alvin Gentry, the assistant coaches including Dan Majerle, and the top leaders on the court like [Steve Nash](#)

. Whispers and rumblings out of the locker room indicated as such.

Two years later, that's still the case. [Alvin Gentry's](#) statement after leaving the Suns mentioned only Robert Sarver as someone he respected.

[Dan Majerle's](#)

comments yesterday mentioned he would definitely stay with the Suns if

[Elston Turner](#)

or he had been offered the interim job, but was leaning against it when Hunter was tabbed.

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Gone are the days when fan-favorite holdovers are given the reins to rekindle flagging excitement. [Paul Westphal](#) . Danny Ainge. Frank Johnson. On a franchise with only 15 head coaches in 45 years, three of them were beloved but underqualified replacements taking over a bad team. Surely, Dan Majerle expected to be next in line.

But Lon Babby and Lance Blanks, and by extension Robert Sarver who hired them, have no interest in blindly keeping with Suns tradition of having fan favorites coach the team just for the sake of it.

That doesn't mean they won't take the risk to hire an underqualified candidate. It just means they won't dip into Suns lore to do it.

Hiring under-qualified candidates to coach an NBA team is not uncommon.

This hiring of [Lindsey Hunter](#) is very similar to the [Bulls](#) ' hiring of another former Sun [Vinny Del Negro](#) in 2008. Del Negro had only a couple years in the Suns organization as an assistant to the GM (lesser than Assistant GM) and broadcaster before being hired to run the Bulls.

It's also similar to Golden State's hiring of Mark Jackson last year. Jackson had only the broadcast booth on his resume before taking over GS last year, and now that team is fighting for home-court advantage in the playoffs.

Another example is Jacque Vaughan in Orlando this season. Yet another is [Scott Skiles](#) . He took over PAOK (Euro team) midseason straight from the active roster in 1997, less than a year out of the NBA. The next year, he was an assistant for the Suns, taking over the HC duties 2 years later.

Larry Bird took over the [Pacers](#) without coaching experience. [Magic](#) Johnson took over the [Lakers](#) for half a season without any experience either.

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The list goes on. And the only complete coaching failure among those examples, even in the near term, is Magic Johnson. I am sure there are other no-experience-HC failures I can't recall at this time, but Magic is the only one that jumps out at me.

A couple of years ago, New Orleans forced their GM (Jeff Bowers) to coach his failing roster after firing his head coach for losing the team and underachieving with the roster. Wouldn't that have been interesting in Phoenix...

Hiring an HC with no experience is not uncommon in the NBA. And many times, those hirings have worked out to be very good coaches.

The Suns' PR problem is that (a) they didn't hire a Suns fan fave and (b) they are bucking a tradition very long in the Valley's tooth and (c) they are doing it while ushering out the old guard.

Folks, I have taken over teams before in the business arena (not sporting arena). Inheriting a management staff is not often a fun proposition because you are always the outsider. In their eyes, you will never know what they know and often they can't even fathom why you were hired over their crony in the first place.

Yet, the reason you were hired is because they weren't getting the job done. To improve the bottom line, you can't just stay with status quo. Your job is to shake things up, hold people accountable and improve the bottom line. Not just make friends and worship your underlings for their long service.

Sometimes, you win those folks over with small tweaks that make all the difference. You make them part of the solution, convince them that this and that change is in their best interest and "kapow" they love you.

But other times, you have to clean house to get the respect you deserve and the results you want. Incumbent staffs can have a sabotaging effect on change, intentional or not, no matter how competent the new boss is.

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Either way, you as the new boss will ultimately be held accountable for the bottom line. It matters not, in the long run, how painful the transition was as long as the end result is a better product.

At the end, if the Suns come out better than they were in September 2010 (not the WCF team, but the only that Blanks and Babby inherited), then all this pain will be worth it.

But there's only four months left on the clock to turn it around.

At the moment, the Suns are worse than ever - or at least the last 25 years. It's no wonder that they decided, after years of trying to win the incumbents over while getting worse, that it was time to clean house and try one more shock to the system.

Despite anything that happened before January 20, 2013, despite all this upheaval and losing that got us to this place and this time, Babby and Blanks **will ultimately be judged on what transpires over this next four months**

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Will Lindsey Hunter be a smash hit?

Will any young players develop into a brighter future than their present?

Will the Suns FO make any moves at the trade deadline to go younger, with more potential and assets?

If the Suns don't recover some kind of good will and hope for the future in these next four months, even more change might be on the horizon.