

Phoenix Suns have unfinished business with unbalanced roster

Written by

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When [Lindsey Hunter](#) took over the 13-28 last-in-the-West [Phoenix Suns](#) last week, the Suns management team of owner Robert Sarver, prez Lon Babby and GM Lance Blanks spoke of player development being a primary focus of Lindsey's over wins and losses.

Pressed by media for more details on which players to develop, Lon Babby said that player development should come from all players on the roster - veterans and young guys alike.

Those words did not resonate with fans or media.

Fans and media expected "player development" to mean playing time for younger guys who hadn't had much burn. They expected a revamped lineup and rotations that would, in effect, sacrifice wins in favor of unearthing potential for next season.

They expected fewer minutes for guys who had already reached their basketball peak, like Jermaine O'Neal (34), [Sebastian Telfair](#) (29) and [Luis Scola](#) (32).

They expected more minutes for young guys like [Wesley Johnson](#) (25), [Michael Beasley](#) (23), [Dia](#)
[nte Garrett](#)
(24),
[Luke Zeller](#)
(24),
[Markieff Morris](#)
(23) and
[Kendall Marshall](#)
(21).

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But in three games under Hunter, we have seen the same starting lineup and mostly the same substitution patterns that [Alvin Gentry](#) had employed.

Hunter did play Wesley Johnson 7 minutes and Luke Zeller for 2 minutes in his first game at the helm. But in the last 10 quarters, he's played the same 9-man rotation of veterans (sans injured Jermaine O'Neal) we have seen all season. No Kendall Marshall. No Diante Garrett.

Michael Beasley has emerged with 22 solid minutes per game after not getting as many as 22 minutes in 14 of the previous 16 games (before that, Beasley got 22+ in nearly all of the first 30 games).

Markieff Morris has gotten 20, 24 and 25 minutes per game after not getting as many as 24 in 17 of the previous 18 games (like Beasley, Morris used to get these kind of solid minutes earlier in the season before losing minutes recently).

But otherwise, the distribution of minutes have been just like his predecessor while the team has played inspired ball.

What Hunter has actually delivered is a team that executes crisper sets on both offense and defense, along with a consistent level of competitive effort from the guys, resulting in a somewhat exhilarating 2-1 record.

Or, exactly what Suns management wanted to see from day one this season. If the Suns continue to play at this level for the rest of the season, it's conceivable they could win more games than they lose.

The problem is that there are no second-half trophies in the NBA. Hunter was saddled with a 13-28 record that won't go away.

There will be no playoffs this season. The Suns would have to go 31-10 just to match the

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current projections for Houston and Utah. This team is not built to go 31-10, let alone overtake those teams.

Giving Hunter a winning second half record (say, 22-20) gets you just 35 wins and a pick in the 10-12 range. After consecutive seasons of the #13 pick, we all know there is a limited upside to a pick in that range.

So why win games now? Why make the effort to prove this roster CAN win a few more than they lose, when at this point it only reduces next season's chances for dramatic improvement by worsening the June draft pick?

The Suns need a high draft pick on this roster (not counting Beasley and Johnson) - someone who can carry this team going forward. A winning second-half record won't help in that regard.

The Suns need to spend the rest of this season evaluating their talent rather than playing the rotation most likely to win. Beasley and Morris are getting their burn, and their minutes may well expand further if they continue to play well. Wesley Johnson is an expiring contract that likely won't return in a prominent role no matter how much run he gets. Same with Luke Zeller.

But there are two other guys who deserve time as soon as possible.

The Suns front office needs to make room for rookie first-round pick Kendall Marshall and the surprising rookie combo guard Diante Garrett (15.1 points, 7.4 assists, 62% 3-pt shooting in D-League) in the rotation.

They have a long-term answer at point guard in [Goran Dragic](#) , but they need to know if his 2013-14 backup is already under contract.

To do that, you have find the available minutes. It does the Suns no long-term good to have Sebastian Telfair playing the backup point guard minutes ahead of Marshall and Garrett.

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Removing Telfair from the equation without reducing Dragic's role gets you 14-16 minutes a night. Marshall and Garrett need more than that.

To that end, in order to play Garrett and/or Dragic at shooting guard for spot minutes while Marshall plays the point, a logjam needs to be cleared at shooting guard as well. Right now, [P. J. Tucker](#) (27), [Shannon Brown](#) (27) and [Jared Dudley](#) (27) get all those minutes, and they deserve them because they are the best players at that position on the current roster.

The Suns cannot get a proper gauge on Marshall or Garrett unless at least two of Tucker, Telfair, Dudley and Brown lose minutes. But that's not going to come from simple benching. All three of these guys play hard, and when you're in the throes of the game and you want to win, those three give you the best chance.

The only way to reduce their minutes is to remove two of them from the current roster via trade or release (or injury).

President of Basketball Operations Lon Babby certainly knows this. You can't just bench Tucker, Dudley, Brown or Telfair without hurting the morale of the team. Dudley is the best of the three, is under a good long-term contract, and wants to be part of the solution. Tucker has a partial guarantee on next season and is far outplaying his contract. The other two are (effectively) expiring contracts. But none are untouchable.

Lon Babby has to clear up the logjam at the guard position to give his younger players a chance to prove themselves.

The best option, of course, is a trade or two or three to bring back future assets. Dudley would get the most booty, while Telfair and Brown might add up to a couple second-rounders or could be salary-filler on a bigger acquisition.

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If there's no trade to be had by the February 21 deadline, the Suns could release either or both of Brown and Telfair so they can sign with contenders.

Otherwise, the Suns waste an opportunity to see what Marshall and Garrett truly have to offer.