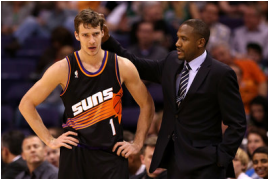


Lindsey Hunter 'defense over offense' is beginning to reap rewards, gain support

Written by
Monday, 11 March 2013 08:39 -



Fans don't know what to make of the [Phoenix Suns](#) ' long-term plan. National experts don't know what to make of it either. Even local media waffle back and forth on what they think the Suns' plan is.

The Phoenix Suns, for their part, have never once deviated from their message to the fans. President of Basketball Operations Lon Babby has repeated himself, time and again, to anyone who asks the question. It's just that no one is listening.

Babby hates the word "tanking".

Babby hates the word "tanking". He says the draft is a crapshoot with no guarantees and that once you get on that treadmill of losing on purpose for the sake of a high draft pick, it's very hard to get off of it. When you go totally young and you teach those guys that it's okay to lose games so the team can draft a better player to replace you, there's nowhere to go but down. That's a losing culture.

Yet, Babby has also said that they are building for the future, and that their decisions will be based on their record. He wanted a team fighting for a playoff spot this season and didn't get it. So, he and the organization realized it was time for change.

And that the change was going to be a really hard one this time. No more pulling that band-aid off slowly. It was time to rip away and deal with the pain.

Ch-ch-changes

First, the 13-28 Suns replaced their fan- and player-favorite head coach [Alvin Gentry](#) with a guy who's never coached on any level before.

[Lindsey Hunter](#)

knew what he wanted to do and the Suns wanted exactly what Hunter wanted - a hard nosed defense-first team of fighters - so it was a good match.

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They kept pulling on the band-aid and, to make the transition easier for Hunter despite the public relations nightmare it would create, they let most of his loyalist coaching staff go too. Better to start with a clean slate and no chance of subterfuge.

Local media hated the move, panning the Suns front office at every turn. "Leaks" from the locker room indicated that veteran players wanted someone else, not a rookie who had never been on the staff. Editorials and radio shows grabbed their pitchforks and lamented the lack of loyalty.

But the Suns held firm, believing they had a formula that could work.

And they were just getting started.

The rookie coach then started giving backup minutes to unproven, younger guys over proven veterans. He has given 10 straight DNP-CDs to his third-leading scorer in favor of a career disappointment with an expiring contract. Soon thereafter, the rookie coach replaced 3/5 of the starting lineup with those young, unproven backups. Finally, the Suns grabbed a guy basically off the street, who hadn't played in two months, and plugged him into a vital role against a West playoff-caliber team.

Disaster, right? Every one of those moves screams the word no one wants to say out loud: tanking. Yet the team still said they wanted to win games. That they didn't care about their draft pick position as much as creating a winning culture.

What gives? You can't have both!

Somehow, some way, despite all the moves that everyone says were evidence of tanking, this team is winning games.

The Stats

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They are 9-13 in 22 games under novice head coach Lindsey Hunter, including 5-5 since the All-Star break. While that's not impressive, it's better than the 13-28 record the team had before Hunter took over.

More impressive: Under Alvin Gentry, the Suns were 5-21 against teams that currently have a winning record. Under Hunter, the Suns have gone 6-8 against such teams.

In the ten games since the All-Star break, the Suns have reversed their rebounding differential (from -2.4 to +3.1 per game), and improved their defensive field goal % (from 47% to 45%), while upping their steals (from 7.7 to 8.7 per game).

At the same time, the Suns' offense has remained terrible while the team focuses almost entirely on defense during practice these days. Since the coaching change, the Suns sport a bottom-five offense and middling defense. Prior to that, the Suns sported a middling offense and a bottom-five defense. The Hunter formula is winning more.

On tanking, that ugly word

But with the playoffs not even a consideration and the draft set up the way it is, why bother winning any more games?

Why aren't the Suns losing on purpose?

"Tell them to go to work and not do their job," Hunter says to those who want the Suns to purposely lose games.

"If I lose on purpose I might not have a job next year," says Dudley, echoing the sentiments of every player on the Suns roster.

Lindsey Hunter wants the team to win a lot of games next year. He and the team believe that

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winning games tomorrow starts by working as hard as you can to create a winning culture right now.

"I think that trying to create winning culture is the focus now," [P.J. Tucker](#) said about the rest of the season. "As we get close to the end of the season, we are probably not going to make the playoffs so now we try to win as many games as we can and keep progressing as a team and as an organization."

Going forward

What's important now to the Suns is to build a culture of winning basketball around a defensive system that harasses and bothers the other team into playing worse than they could.

Hunter wants the team to emulate his playing style, which carried him to a 17-year playing career as a backup PG, including two championships with different teams ([Lakers](#) and [Piston](#)).

"The biggest thing that I stress a lot is impacting the ball," [Hunter said to hoopsworld reporter Alex Kennedy](#). "That's like a pet peeve of mine; I hate to see the ball handler not being harassed. I hate to see guys pick their dribble up and nobody is pressuring them so they just make passes."

"It's tough, but to be really good, I think you have to be able to do those things. There's no easy way to get there. You just have to go through the hard part of learning, and we may lose some games because of it, but I think in the long run we'll be better for it."

The hard part is taking what's basically the same exact group of players that's been raised on "offense overcomes defense" to "defense covers for offense". Hunter has extended practices and made guys work harder late in the season than they have ever worked in-season before.

"It's not like I'm saving them for the playoffs," Hunter replied to a pregame question on long practices the other day.

Veteran support

At least one veteran is already firmly in Hunter's corner.

"I think he's going to be a really good coach in this league," backup center Jermaine O'Neal said of Hunter to Kennedy. "He isn't afraid to get in a guy's face. That's his mentality. That's what makes teams really good. That's what makes young teams better, because it holds you accountable and you learn from your mistakes. But at the same time, he pats you on the back too, when needed.

"I think there has been a lot of focus on 'no experience,' but his experience is that he played 17 years. Basketball doesn't change. The X's and O's don't change. The mentality and intensity that he brings are going to have this team moving in the right direction.

"We've gone all the way back to drills that I haven't seen since high school, literally. He's gone back to the bare basics of basketball and that's what this team needs, with our youth and our experience.

"He has done a great job implementing his style. He's very aggressive with everybody on their attention span and their approach. If you don't bring it, he's going to let you know about it. That's what this team needs. This team is very young and they need that aggressive nature to put them in the right direction."

Ok, so that's one guy. We all heard earlier this season that, apparently, the core players would not have chosen Hunter if given the choice. My guess is that players prefer the known quantity over the unknown. Now that Hunter is better known, and the team is winning some games, the players are starting to turn the corner.

"It's a little bit different," point guard [Goran Dragic](#) said to Kennedy. "We run more and Coach Hunter is emphasizing defense, which is totally opposite."

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Reportedly, the D'Antoni and Gentry Suns have spent the past nine years shaping the offense while spending little practice time on defense.

Now under Hunter, the entire focus is defense while Hunter just wants the offense to function enough to get the job done. He told reporters he would change the offense anyway, but needs the summer to get that done.

For now, Hunter is just trying to get by on offense.

"Simplifying things, trying to get guys familiar with situations," Hunter said. "Doesn't matter what you run. If the guys don't execute it, it's no good."

"It was fun playing for Alvin and it's fun now playing for Lindsey. I like him because he makes everybody engaged," Dragic continued, on Hunter. "If you don't do the job right, he's going to get into you. He'll tell you straight to your face. I think that helps everyone. It doesn't matter if you're in the starting five or coming off of the bench. Everybody has to do the same things. If he's yelling at me, it's only because he wants to help me. He has a lot of experience. He has two championship rings. I can only learn from him."

Of Dragic fitting into the coach's new style, I think the jury is already in on that one. Hunter has consistently praised Dragic since the day he took the job, and given Dragic more minutes while cutting back the minutes of all the other veterans.

"Those are the types of plays that we want to be known for," Hunter said of Goran diving for a loose ball on Saturday night to keep a late possession alive, ultimately ending in Marshall making shot to give 7 point lead.

"Blue collar, desperate attitude."

Quite a shift from the old Suns.

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