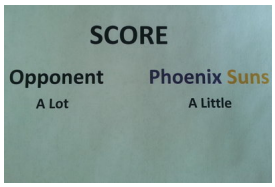

Celtics 113, Suns 88

Raptors 98, Suns 71

Nuggets 111, Suns 81

Are these all of the Suns bad losses this season? No. These are the bad losses in the last ten games. The Suns have made an artform of losing in spectacular fashion this season with 11 of their 43 losses coming by 20 or more points. The practice of getting thumped has actually increased since Lindsey Hunter took over. In 24 games under Hunter the Suns have lost by 20+ six times after only doing so five times in 41 games under Alvin Gentry. While the Suns have a slightly better winning percentage over the last 24 (9-15 37.5%) than under Gentry (13-28 31.7%) it appears they have become more prone to calling it a night when they face adversity.

But when the Suns don't enter meltdown mode they've actually fared pretty well. The Suns are 13-10 this season in games decided by six or less points. Comparative to their overall record (22-43) that's actually a testament to their ability to close out games (considering how bad the team is). What's even more impressive is that the team is 8-1 in games decided by six or less points under Hunter.

8-1.

Only once, in Hunter's first game, have the Suns won by more than six points in their last 24 games. Compared to a 5-9 record in such games under Gentry the team has finally figured out a formula for closing out tight contests.

So the team is either battling or getting blown out.

In the Suns nine wins under Hunter the average margin of victory is +4.8 points. In the teams 15 losses, the margin of defeat is -16.9. Quite an incongruous dynamic at play. The team either competes or gets their teeth kicked in. Is this a function of young players building confidence when they stay in games? The other end of the spectrum, and more prevalent, is that once the team becomes disconcerted they tend to enter meltdown mode and have quit several times in my opinion.

Lindsey Hunter has apparently noticed this himself after the Suns latest imbroglio at Houston, "Our guys have to compete and I didn't see that. It's very disappointing, very embarrassing, unacceptable."

I agree, coach, it's all of those things. But it's nothing new.

We can parse season data to analyze this from a different angle.

The Suns are 7-25 this season when their opponent scores at least 100 points. The differential for the Suns in those games is -11.3. In their seven wins the margin is +6.4, while it is -15.6 in the losses. The Suns have won close games and gotten their asses handed to them in the losses.

In 12 of those 32 games the Suns have also topped 100 points with their opponent. The Suns are 7-5 in those games with a +.9 average margin of victory. In the games the Suns haven't topped 100 (obviously they are 0-20) they have lost by an average of 17.8 points. 20 losses by an average of 17.8 points. The Suns have had their share of savage beatings.

What about the Lindsey Hunter era?

The Suns have reached 100 points five times and are 4-1 in those games with a +2.2 margin.

Suns opponents have scored 100 12 times and the Suns are 2-10 in those games with a deficit of 14 points. The new defensive philosophy of the Suns shows up half the time (12 of 24 games holding their opponent below 100 points), but just as important is an offense that only shows up one in five games.

By this train of thought a game like Houston is nearly over by the time the Rockets score 30 in the first quarter (well on their way to 100) and by a score of 58-45 at halftime you should turn the tv off if you don't want to watch the Suns lose.

The Suns may be terrible, but at least they're predictably terrible.

This conclusion has other implications for your viewership and rooting interests as well. If you're a person of the disposition of cheering for draft lottery number combinations you might not want to watch competitive games. I lamented over the fact that the Suns could lose independent of getting humiliated after the debacle in Houston, but maybe they can't. Maybe those of you wanting the Suns to climb the lottery ladder have to accept that the Suns self-respect will likely need to be pillaged in order for the team to amass enough L's to pick commensurate with your wishes.

Somewhat of a grim prospect, but something to mull over nonetheless.

This also has ramifications for those of you that still want the Suns to win at any cost. If the Suns are still in the game at the end of the third quarter there's a very good chance they will win. That should give you a confidence boost when the game is coming down to the wire.

Hopefully you've enjoyed digesting this dissertation. It has to be easier to swallow than the noxious performance by the Suns on Wednesday. The data reveals the significance of the numbers 100 and six. With 17 left the Suns also need six to avoid 27 and infamy. They still have a chance at finishing three, but on 5/21 the holy grail of numbers is one.

**Special thanks to Kris Habbas for contributing research to this article.*