

## The best laid schemes of PBOs and GMs... often go awry

Written by

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The best laid schemes of mice and men... often go awry.

Two men brimming with confidence and poise entered employment with the Phoenix Suns organization just as the team had hit hard times. George was a shrewd fellow with a sharp tongue and a rapier wit. His counterpart, Lennie, was a man of stout stature, but feeble mind. The shared dream of the duo was to return the Suns to prominence.

The Suns franchise is the epitome of the phrase, "close, but no cigar."

For his part, Lennie just dreamed of tending to the players he found pretty to his eyes. George was Lennie's protector, attempting to keep him from simple minded mistakes when evaluating the players he thought were shiny and special. The two were nearly inseparable and shared a palpable bond of camaraderie.

They laid out their plan and went about achieving their vision. At first things seemed auspicious and they thought they were on their way. They often sat together and George would tell fantastic stories to Lennie about the prolific feats the franchise would soon perform. Lennie loved the stories and just wanted to tend to his players.

Then a sinister presence materialized from the shadows one day when George was not around to protect Lennie. It was Michael Beasley. Lennie couldn't help himself. He grabbed onto Michael with his prodigious strength and wouldn't let go.

When the fans of Phoenix realized the carnage of Lennie's actions they formed a lynch mob. 2Nashty grabbed his pitchfork. East Bay Ray lit the torches. They would put an end to this wickedness.

Realizing what Lennie had done (and needing a proper scapegoat), George met him at their secret war room deep in the depths of USAC. He knew there was no saving Lennie now. He

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did the only compassionate thing he could think of. He shot Lennie in the back of the head.

When the mob arrived their vengeance was satiated and they left George to his devices. George missed Lennie, but still held fast to their shared dream. Fade out.

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This was not a story about successful rebuilding. This was a fictitious satire about rebuilding gone awry. Hopefully the real Suns front office can learn from this melancholy tale and won't repeat the mistakes of George and Lennie. For other hints they could also look at the successes and failures of other franchises to extend their purview.

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### Toronto Raptors

**The History:** The Raptors have struggled for most of their 18 season history. The team has only reached the semifinal round in the playoffs once (2000-01).

**Line of Demarcation:** The Raptors made the playoffs in back to back seasons in 2006-07 and 2007-08 followed by only 33 wins in 2008-09.

**The Rebuild:** The Raptors are in the situation they now inhabit due to a bad #1 overall selection in a weak 2006 draft class (should have taken LaMarcus Aldridge) and losing their #4 overall pick in the 2003 draft (Chris Bosh) for relatively little, depending on the development of Jonas Valanciunas. In 2008 Toronto traded Roy Hibbert to Indiana for a 30 year old Jermaine O'Neal (who only played for them for half a season), who was flipped in a deal that landed them Shawn Marion and eventually vanished into nothing.

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Subsequent draft picks of DeMar Derozan (#9), Ed Davis (#13), Valanciunas (#5) and Terrence Ross (#8) have yielded solid prospects, but no one who currently appears destined to be an all-star. The Raptors would draft #10 this year based on today's standings (if they hadn't traded their pick to Houston in the Kyle Lowry deal and the pick was then traded to OKC in the Harden deal) , giving them just one top five pick in their current rebuild. Up against the cap, the Raptors seem poised to prolong their resurgence at least one more year.

### Years in Rebuild Mode: Five

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### Philadelphia 76ers

**The History:** The 76ers only missed the playoffs five times in their first 42 seasons, but have done so 10 times in the past 22. They have won three NBA championships with the last coming in 1982-83. The once decorated franchise has struggled to find an identity since the departure of Allen Iverson.

**Line of Demarcation:** Philadelphia has made the playoffs the last two years, but will be on the outside looking in this season. The last time the 76ers won more than 43 games was the 2002-03 season.

**The Rebuild:** The Sixers have committed the cardinal sin of rebuilding by picking higher than ninth just once in nine years of purgatory. But surely they've learned from their lessons, right? No, not right. Philadelphia is currently slated at #11 and has no realistic chance of sinking lower than #10. The Sixers did hit on a #17 overall pick that landed them Jrue Holiday in 2009, but

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whiffed on a #2 pick (Evan Turner), who has been underwhelming, the following year. The latest setback on the treadmill of mediocrity was a deal that sent promising big Nikola Vucevic away as part of a package that returned Andrew Bynum. Bynum has never played a game for Philadelphia.

### Years in Rebuild Mode: Ten

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### Washington Wizards

**The History:** The Wizards were an average to above average franchise for much of their history as the Bullets, reaching their apogee in 1977-78 by winning the NBA championship, but the team derailed after the 1987-88 season and has been one of the whipping boys of the league since.

**The Line of Demarcation:** One could argue that the team has been in rebuild mode for 25 years, but they did make the playoffs four consecutive seasons from 2004-05 to 2007-08 before Gilbert Arenas's career imploded.

**The Rebuild:** After a series of less than impressive decisions, the Wizards may have finally gained some traction with recent draft picks John Wall (#1 overall) and Bradley Beal (#3 overall). The team doesn't have much cap leverage due to \$27 million going to veterans Nene and Emeka Okafor, but it appears that the current roster may compete for a playoff spot as it stands now.

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### Years in Rebuild Mode: Five

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### Detroit Pistons

**The History:** The Pistons have been a model franchise for a large part of their history; a model in terms of success if not in terms of on-court demeanor. After winning titles as the “Bad Boys” they defied conventional wisdom by winning another title in 2003-04 without an incontrovertibly genuine superstar.

**Line of Demarcation:** On November 3, 2008 the Pistons traded Chauncey Billups to the Denver Nuggets. That marked the end of an era.

**The Rebuild:** The good news for Pistons fans is that two of their last three draft picks (Greg Monroe and Brandon Knight) are their two best players and the other is 19 (Andre Drummond) and has intriguing potential. The bad news is that three of the next four are in their thirties. The Pistons will have some cap room this summer, but may be best served to bide their time until more money comes off the books the following year. The Pistons appear to be at least two years away from competing for the playoffs.

### Years in Rebuild Mode: Five

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### Cleveland Cavaliers

**The History:** The Cavs have been a slightly less successful version of the Suns. They even came into existence shortly after the Suns. Cleveland was never able to get over the top in a tough Eastern Conference in the late 80s/early 90s and failed to reach the zenith again recently despite possessing the preternatural talents of Lebron James.

**Line of Demarcation:** The decision.

**The Rebuild:** When the Cavs lost Lebron they went from the penthouse to the outhouse overnight. The Cavs may ascend from that predicament expeditiously, however, as they appear to have successfully navigated the lottery the past two seasons. Three top-four picks make navigating much easier. At the head of that list is budding superstar Kyrie Irving, who fits the bill of a franchise player. Entering this offseason with another potential top-five pick and \$30 million in disposable cap space, the Cavs could be a top four team in the East as early as next season if they don't find a way to royally screw themselves.

**Years in Rebuild Mode: Three**

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### Orlando Magic

**The History:** The Magic have had a comparatively brief and undulous history. The draft gods have smiled on them to the tune of three #1 overall picks (Shaquille O'Neal, Chris Webber and Dwight Howard) in just 24 years of franchise history (the Suns meanwhile have had zero). In spite of the immensely talented individuals who have donned Magic jerseys, the team has failed to reach the ultimate prize and has instead served as a talent turnstile.

**Line of Demarcation:** After being unable to appease Dwight Howard (is it even humanly possible to?) the Magic traded him for a return package featuring Aaron Afflalo, Nikola Vucevic and three first round picks.

**The Rebuild:** This is the first year of reconstruction for Orlando so their progress is pretty hard to gauge. Vucevic has shown enough promise to conclude that he will be at least a competent starter in the league (22-year-old second-year players who average 12 and 12 are nice). If history is a bellwether for the Magic's near future they will probably end up with the number one pick, be back in the playoffs in no more than two years, and eventually lose said superstar to the Lakers.

**Years in Rebuild Mode: One**

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**Charlotte Bobcats**

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**The History:** Since their inception in 2004-05 the Bobcats have been an impeccable example of where heinously incompetent management can lead a team. The Bobcats have managed just one winning record in the franchise's nine seasons. Furthermore, Charlotte has yet to draft a player (out of eight lottery picks) that has made an all-star game.

**Line of Demarcation:** Opening day of the 2004-05 season.

**The Rebuild:** It's not going well. Kemba Walker has showed signs of improvement, but when Kemba Walker is the best player on your team that is pretty telling. The team is hoping for big things from Michael Kidd-Gilchrist, but it has not yet materialized for the 19-year-old phenom. God only knows how far this team is from elevating itself to being a consistent winner.

**Years in Rebuild Mode: Nine (The entire franchise history)**

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## Utah Jazz

**The History:** The Jazz are also a close approximation to the Suns, as the franchise has been largely successful without attaining the ultimate goal. Utah has only lost 50 games once since the 1982-83 season. The team even has two NBA Finals appearances, like the Suns, with Karl Malone and John Stockton propelling them. Unfortunately, they were thwarted by some guy named Michael Jordan.



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**The Line of Demarcation:** On February 23, 2011 the Jazz traded malcontent Deron Williams to the New Jersey Nets for Devin Harris, Derrick Favors, a 2011 first rounder that became Enes Kanter (#3 overall) and another first rounder in this year's draft. William's career, fittingly, has spiraled downward since the trade.

**The Rebuild:** With Jefferson and Millsap coming off the books, Utah will have \$30+ million in cap space this summer. Couple that with a young nucleus of Gordon Hayward (22), Favors (21) and Kanter (20) and two first round draft picks this year (between 10-20) and the Jazz appear well on their way for a return to prominence.

**Years in Rebuild Mode: Three**

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### Dallas Mavericks

**The History:** The Mavericks last rebuild lasted through the entire decade of the 1990s. Ten years. What extricated Dallas from a decade of doldrums? In 1998 the Mavericks made a draft day trade with the Milwaukee Bucks where the Bucks received Robert Traylor and the Mavericks got Dirk Nowitzki in return. It can be hard to gauge who wins a trade right away, but in the long run this one was definitely a draw. The dawn of the new century brought new life to a renascent franchise, though, and Dallas made the playoffs 12 consecutive years, even winning the title just two years ago. That streak is almost sure to be extinguished this year as the Mavericks sit 3.5 games out of the playoffs with two teams to jump.

**The Line of Demarcation:** Age. Five of the seven leaders in minutes per game are at least 33

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years old. Dirk Nowitzki will be 35 years old on opening night next season. Compound that with the roster attrition in the form of Tyson Chandler and the Mavericks appear destined for another rough patch.

**The Rebuild:** This would be year one unless Dallas can find a way to bounce back and make this an anomaly instead of a bellwether. The Mavericks may be preparing for Armageddon (or counting on their ability to max a couple players, because they currently only have \$2 million committed for the 2014-15 season. They definitely aren't prepared for a youth movement, though, because Jae Crowder is the only player on the roster under the age of 25 that's seen any playing time this season.

**Years in Rebuild Mode: One**

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### Portland Trail Blazers

**The History:** Another traditionally successful franchise, the Blazers won a championship in 1976-77 behind Maurice Lucas and Bill Walton. The team also had a ridiculous streak of 21 consecutive years in the playoffs from 1982-83 to 2002-03. In contradistinction to those glory days Portland has made just three playoff appearances in the past decade.

**The Line of Demarcation:** Brandon Roy and Greg Oden's knees.

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**The Rebuild:** Portland is a paragon of resiliency. Instead of being pulverized by the magnitude of these two losses, the Blazers future still appears bright. LaMarcus Aldridge, at 27, is the veteran on the team and it appears the team hit on last year's #6 overall pick Damian Lillard. The bad news for the Blazers is that the team is top heavy and financial considerations may make it difficult to acquire complementary pieces to integrate with their wunderkinds. A caveat – the Blazers owe their first round pick to Charlotte, but it is top 12 protected. Portland is currently 12<sup>th</sup> in the lottery seeding, just one game behind Dallas for 13<sup>th</sup>.

### Years in Rebuild Mode: Two

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### Minnesota Timberwolves

**The History:** Minnesota is still somewhat of a fledgling franchise with only 24 seasons under their belt. It's been a painful youth, with only three seasons of 50+ wins to date. Even an interval of success (due to Kevin Garnett) sandwiched between years of futility was overwhelmingly filled with first round exits.

**The Line of Demarcation:** Latrell Sprewell was compelled to leave as he sought to find a way to feed his children. Sam Cassell also exited stage left.

**The Rebuild:** The Wolves are a great example of what happens when you consistently miss on high lottery picks. After years of stumbling and bumbling the Wolves finally appear to have built a core around Kevin Love, who was acquired in a draft day trade for OJ Mayo. However, they are still in freefall this year after being besieged by injuries. After a 16-15 start inspired hope of

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a battle for a playoff spot the team has floundered to the tune of 7-27 past that point. A potentially high lottery pick would be the team's best route at further improvement as they have little flexibility against the cap.

**Years in Rebuild Mode: Nine**

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### Sacramento Kings

**The History:** The Kings have been a downtrodden team for the majority of their history, but they did win a title 62 years ago when they were the Rochester Royals, so there's that. Sacramento was close to something special in the early 2000s, but ran into the buzzsaw that was the Shaq/Kobe Lakers.

**The Line of Demarcation:** The departure of Chris Webber followed by the ouster of coach Rick Adelman spelled the end of an eight year run.

**The Rebuild:** The Kings rebuild has consisted mostly of gross mismanagement and ineptitude. Players of questionable character (DeMarcus Cousins) have entered a questionable culture while fans feel bamboozled by the seemingly impending relocation of the franchise. Hopefully the Kings can win in their (likely) new home.

**Years in Rebuild Mode: Seven**

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### New Orleans Hornets/Pelicans

**The History:** Since their inception in 1988-89 as the Charlotte Hornets the team has been fringe mediocre and has never made it past the semifinal round in the playoffs. That appeared ready to change after the Hornets selected Chris Paul with the #4 overall pick in the 2005 draft. Bulwarked by the trio of Peja Stojakovic, David West and Tyson Chandler the Hornets set a franchise record for victories (56) in 2007-08.

**The Line of Demarcation:** Chandler left first, Stojakovic got old, and David West exited. When a disenfranchised Chris Paul was moved before the strike-shortened season it was time to start over.

**The Rebuild:** The Hornets got Eric Gordon and a draft pick that became Austin Rivers in return for Paul. New Orleans hit the jackpot in the 2013 draft and selected Anthony Davis #1 overall. An icing on the cake free agent signing of Ryan Andersen also nudged the team in the right direction, but injuries and unfulfilled expectations will have the Hornets adding another high lottery pick to a precocious group with six of the seven players with the most minutes per game being 24 or under.

**Years in Rebuild Mode: Two**

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### Phoenix Suns

**The History:** The Suns franchise is the epitome of the phrase, “close, but no cigar.” Starting with the coin flip for Lew Alcindor, the Suns have continually been on the cusp of greatness. Despite having the fourth-best winning percentage in the league, the Suns have failed to win the title in two trips to the Finals. Starting with the 1988-89 season, coming off the heels of a drug scandal, Phoenix made the playoffs 19 times in 22 years. The most recent stretch of success culminated in an exciting, fast-paced brand of basketball given the moniker “seven seconds or less” engineered by Steve Nash. The Suns still played the role of bridesmaids during this era, with bad luck (cruel irony and maledictions) and bitter rivals getting the best of them as they failed to get past the Western Conference Finals in three attempts.

**The Line of Demarcation:** On the heels of a loss to the Lakers in the Western Conference Finals the Suns declined to offer a max contract to Amar'e Stoudemire due to health and insurance reasons. Without his robin, batman (Nash) languished for two more years on a team with a less than stellar supporting cast.

**The Rebuild:** The realization that wholesale changes are needed has just begun to settle in for Phoenix. Unlike other teams at the bottom of the scrap heap the Suns six leaders in minutes per game are all at least 27. The team's best assets moving forward are cap flexibility and this year's lottery pick. As tyros to the reclamation process, the Suns will need to catch up to some of their brethren.

**Years in Rebuild Mode: Three**

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So is this tragic tale of George and Lennie prophetic? I'm sure Lennie hopes otherwise. Some of the red numbers above may make your heart sick. But if the Suns can learn from the pitfalls and prosperities of these other woebegone franchises they may avoid the wrath of the angry

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mob... or the fog of apathy that even the brilliance of the Sun cannot penetrate.