At some point, this had to happen. When your beloved stars get old and/or injured together, a team's front office has to decide whether to ride them into the sunset or to cut them loose (with or without ceremony).

In the case of the Phoenix Suns , Steve Nash and Grant Hill (and Amare Stoudemire before that), the team went with the former. Nash and Hill did not want to go anywhere, and no one in the league was willing to give up comparable value in exchange for them anyway. So they decided to let Nash and Hill's contracts expire before starting over completely.

Year One of Rebuilding?

"I would argue we were letting the Nash-Hill era run its full course and now have started anew," Suns President of Basketball Operations Lon Babby says.

The Suns entered last summer with only a handful of middling contracts on the books and a boatload of cap space to spend on free agents. But the market lacked stars. And with the near-misses on playoff appearances, the draft wasn't going to yield a star either.

They played it safe, signed short contracts and tried to catch lightning in a bottle with a young free agent or two, but mainly they acquired draft picks to start their rebuild in earnest. In fact, the Suns now play their youngest rotation since 2005 and have 6 first-round picks coming in the next three years.

Well all was said and done, they replaced 9 of the 13 guys on the roster before opening night. And have replaced two more since then. A true upheaval.

Midseason, after a 13-28 start punctuated by playing the oldest guys on the roster, the team and coach decided to go their separate ways.

At this point, the rebuild was truly on.

Or is it Year Three of Rebuilding?

Others would argue the rebuild began the moment the Suns entered playoff-less purgatory, which would be three years ago in 2010 when Amare Stoudemire left the only team he had ever known for $100 million guaranteed by the Big Apple.

Suns fans loved Amare and the team loved him. They gave him a max contract the moment they were allowed to, in the summer of 2005, mere weeks before he went down for microfracture surgery and missed a whole year of basketball. Then they offered another in the summer of 2010, but this time only guaranteed $75 million of $96 million. All he had to do was play a bit over half the available minutes over the first four years to guarantee the other $20 million.

Since then, the Phoenix Suns have been a shadow of themselves. Nash got older and no new stars were acquired to replace the ones lost in Amare, Marion and others.

The Suns put up "a good fight", played an old rotation (29.6 years old in 2011, 29.2 years old in 2012) and came up just short of the playoffs twice while Nash and Hill's contracts ran out.

Did the Suns start rebuilding in 2010? Or did they just try to stay competitive for a while longer than, in hindsight, was justified?

If the Suns had squeaked into the playoffs in either of those years, would this even be a discussion?

Youth Movement?

The playing rotation a year ago was, collectively, 29.2 years old. I calculated this number by multiplying each rotation player's age by the minutes they played in March 2012. *Every minute of March 2012 was played by a 5-man unit that was about 29 years old.*

To put this into perspective, the median "age" of all NBA playing rotations in March 2013 is 26.1 years old. Last year's Suns were three years older than this, yet could not make the playoffs. To make the comparison even worse, the median age of all lottery team rotations this March is 25.1 years old.

This spring's Suns rotation is right at the median - 26.1 years old. They are playing some older guys - O'Neal is 34 and Scola is 32 - to bring that "age" up, but otherwise most of the players are young. Dragic, Beasley, Johnson, the Morri, Marshall and Garrett are all at or under that median age.

Still, a 26-year-old rotation is not actually that young.

Houston and Cleveland's playing rotation this March is only 24.4 years old. Charlotte's is the league's youngest at 23.5. The only other lottery (non-playoff) team with an older playing rotation than the Suns this March is Dallas (a whopping 29.6 years old, same as the Suns in 2011).

But the Suns ARE younger than they have been in eight years.

And you can expect next year's team to be even younger than this one. Next year, the Suns will likely replace three "older" rotation players with rookies in their late teens or early 20s.

But the problem with playing a team full of young guys is that you have no one to lead them by example. No one to set the bar high on concentration and performance on a consistent, night-in night-out basis.

"It really changes from week to week, from game to game," Babby said. "Even within a game there are good stretches and bad stretches. We were up 5 in Houston and then Goran gets his third foul and we give up a 20-2 run. We don't know how to steady that, how to stop it. It's from playing a lot of young guys."

The Suns have a couple of veterans who work extremely hard, but they are either not the best off-court leaders or they are not talented enough to show the young guys that hard work pays off in game-winners and All-Star berths.

While the Suns wait until summer to continue the rebuild, what can they accomplish in these final weeks of a lost season?

"Still looking for progress - the same as it's been," Babby says. "We are looking for consistent effort from the young guys. We watch practice and see how they carry themselves and looking for focus and consistency there as well as during the games."

Next year promises to be a tough year as well. As you get younger, the wins are harder to come by. In fact, the only NBA teams with a playing rotation younger than 26 who are projected to make the playoffs this season are Houston, Golden State and Indiana. The other 13 playoff-projected teams are much older, with a median age of 28.1 years old.

But next year is a huge unknown.

Lon Babby's contract runs through the end of July 2013. GM Lance Blanks' contract runs through 2014. Managing Partner Robert Sarver has let people go short of their contract many times, so that doesn't mean these guys stay in their positions.

But if Sarver believes this is Year 1 of a solid rebuilding plan that includes 10 draft picks in the next three years and no albatross contracts, he just might let it ride.

The front office has made more good decisions than bad ones when you look at each transaction individually. All of their draft picks are defensible, and were generally graded well by pundits (see Seth's article on this topic here). It's just that when you're picking at 13, 14, 15 each season it's hard to find that next star.

Most of their trades and signings have been okay. A few have been busts, to be sure. But they were all "safe" low risk/reward efforts.

But this group has done nothing spectacular, and Suns fans are tired of waiting for that to happen. We are patient, as long as it doesn't take too long. Stars have all disappeared and no new ones are coming down the pike.

Fans are frustrated. Players are frustrated. The front office is frustrated.

To a Suns fan, the future looks bleak. Bleaker than ever. The Sun appears to have set.

As for Babby, he's just taking it one day at a time until he and Sarver have that conversation about contract extensions after the season ends in April.

"I have made some notes in a journal that I keep," he says. "So that when I sit down with Robert I'm not going on what happened that day, but on what happened all along. And hopefully Robert will do the same."

Looking at it from a big-picture point of view is tough to do sometimes, especially when you're riding the roller coaster of wins and losses throughout the season.

"Keeping emotions in check from game to game," Babby says of the toughest aspect of his job. "Not getting too high or too low. That's been tough and something I will have to learn."