

## Recap: Suns fight hard, but lose to tough Pacers, 112-104

Written by

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The Phoenix Suns put up the good fight like they have been able to do in the season's second half against playoff-quality teams, but this time they played a team (the Indiana Pacers) more than ready to fight back hard.

The Indiana Pacers are a tough team. They hit you, they poke at the ball with their long arms and they fight for position on each end of the floor. To top it off, they have excellent execution of their offense, which is heavily based on inside-out scoring. Their shots are high-percentage taken by confident shooters.

Yet the Suns, behind "Rocky" (Goran Dragic), kept fighting back. Dragic scored 9 big points in the middle of the fourth to pull the Suns to within 1 before the Pacers got lucky on a tough call for a foul on a George three-pointer.

George made all three, but then the Suns used some nifty passing to get an old-fashioned three-point play by O'Neal.

The Pacers kept getting offensive rebounds and drawing fouls though, which helped them keep their slim lead. The Pacers made 9 straight free throws without a field goal, while the Suns missed shots, and took a 6-point lead before West nailed the coffin with a jumper.

Goran Dragic had 21 points, 9 assists and 4 rebounds in his return to the lineup. And he could have had half a dozen more assists if the Pacers hadn't been so good at stripping the ball and blocking shots at the hoop.

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In the first half, the Pacers used their quick length to outrebound (27-19 advantage at halftime) the smaller and/or slower-to-the-ball Suns. Hamed Haddadi and Jermaine O'Neal had the size but not the quickness, while Markieff Morris and Luis Scola just didn't have the size to out-jump the Pacers for contested rebounds.

The Suns stayed in the game by making jump shots to the tune of an unusual 48% at halftime, and by hustling in a way they seem to only reserve for playoff-level opponents lately. Head coach Lindsey Hunter has "no earthly idea" why the Suns can't play this hard against easier competition, but they don't. They seem determined to put out only the minimum effort they think they need, which is almost always not enough.

"I think a lot of times, they don't understand what maximum effort means," Hunter said before the game about the up and down effort the young guys have displayed. "We have to show them, teach them, about not giving up on a play. A lot of guys have never heard that before. Just because you hit a screen, that doesn't mean the play's over."

These young guys were the stars of their high school teams, their AAU teams, their college teams even. Now in the NBA, they are just... players. Not stars. And guys who are not stars need to exert more effort than those who are. And those who are stars are playing pretty darn hard every second too.

Goran Dragic knows this.

"He'll kill himself if you let him," Hunter said of Dragic. "He'll never say he's beat up. He'll just walk around looking real bad, but not talking about it."

The Suns started the second half on fire, but were held back by fouls after they'd pulled within 2. Dragic had his fourth foul within three minutes of the second half.

After the Suns pulled to within one, the Pacers went on a run while Dragic took a seat to nurse his four fouls. Kendall Marshall didn't do much better, getting his third foul by mid-quarter. George Hill was working these guys hard with contact.

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The Pacers pulled away in the third and kept the lead between 5-10 points despite the Suns hustling as hard as they could really play.

The Pacers just do it better. The Pacers were highly engaged too, as a matter of fact. They played chippy. And they used their long arms to contest every dribble, every pass and every shot.

At the end of three, it was 86-76 Pacers with 40 of their points in the paint.