

Thoughts on the Phoenix Suns' extension of PBO Lon Babby: Now What?

Written by
Wednesday, 03 April 2013 10:34 -



I have been trying to nail down (or at least get some insight) on the Phoenix Suns' summer direction but the front office has not been inclined to comment on it while the current season is still going on. There are obvious limitations on speaking about other teams' players, and the draft is still a big unknown until the lottery and workouts and players declaring for the draft. Even then, teams keep it close to the vest anyway.

Lon Babby, the [Phoenix Suns](#) President of Basketball Operations, rightly doesn't want to give anything away on Blanks' or Hunter's performance as of yet. The season's not over, and a lot of times simple comments on performance get blown out of proportion by the media. Plus, and this is my own conclusion, he didn't know if he himself would get a say in whether Blanks or Hunter stay on since his own contract expired in July.

"I may be like Moses. I'm on a journey to get to the promised land of a championship. I didn't want to leave at the start of the walk through the desert." -Lon Babby

But one area I thought I could make headway was to establish a basic timeline for naming a permanent head coach this summer. Over the weekend, I tried to engage Lon Babby in a discussion about that timing but got no response. This was unusual, because Lon has always been good about at least replying in some way to my inquiries*. Figuring it was a holiday, I tried again on Monday but still got nothing.

Ultimately, I gave up waiting and [I wrote the Tuesday article on my own assumptions](#) alone based on history. Robert Sarver had never acted quickly to keep his incumbent President/GM since taking over the team. There was always, after some unsuccessful negotiation, an agreement to remove the President/GM from their position (Bryan Colangelo, then Mike D'Antoni, then Steve Kerr).**

And without the President/GM settled, there was no way to resolve a head coaching situation. So I was fully prepared to wait longer than anyone thought was prudent.

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But a mere FOUR HOURS later, the Suns organization surprised me. Robert Sarver broke his own mold this week by keeping a President/GM longer than one contract. And he did it in a timely, orderly fashion without any hiccup to the offseason planning process.

I also got my answer on why Lon Babby had been nonresponsive the last few days to my queries on the HC: because he was in the middle of negotiating his own extension.

Now that Lon Babby is under contract for two more years, [azcentral.com beat writer extraordinaire Paul Coro has this tidbit](#) :

Sarver's endorsement means that [General Manager Lance] Blanks will likely stay on board for his last contract year and there is a strong possibility that interim head coach [Lindsey Hunter](#) is named the permanent coach.

I am not sure if this is informed opinion or not. This could just be Paul's conjecture, but it also could be based on scuttlebutt around the arena.

Lance Blanks

Clearly and consistently, both Babby and Sarver have supported the work of Lance Blanks as talent evaluator even though the public has been less than enamored with him. Some of that is that he is "terrible at PR", as Sarver admitted in January. And part of it is that the Suns have not made any WOW moves in the three years since Blanks took over as GM. He has not hit a home run yet while the team had declined in performance every season.

[Marcin Gortat](#) was really a nice find, but a lot of people in the NBA felt the same. Gortat was the most coveted underutilized big man in the game, playing behind [Dwight Howard](#), and a lot of teams wanted him. The Suns took advantage of a since-ousted Orlando GM Otis

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Smith who still loved

[Hedo Turkoglu](#)

in that deal.

On a lower scale, Blanks has unearthed some gems. [P.J. Tucker](#) , Wes Johnson, [Sebastian Telfair](#) , [Shannon Brown](#)

, [Michael Redd](#)

are not diamonds by any means and may not be legitimate NBA starters, but they became valid rotation players. They were all signed to low-level contracts off the street and played well in Phoenix. The same could not be said for some other guys Blanks gave a chance to succeed in the NBA:

[Zabian Dowdell](#)

, Garrett Siler,

[Aaron Brooks](#)

, [Ronnie Price](#)

, [Luke Zeller](#)

and

[Diante Garrett](#)

.

His big free agent signing was Michael Beasley this season, who has not worked out. In fact, Beasley is having his worst season in the NBA despite being given a great deal of support and love within the front office ranks. The Suns tried to help Beasley reach his potential, but fared no better than his two prior teams. Blanks' draft picks were "eh". Not bad, not necessarily good either. He mis-evaluated [Goran Dragic](#) and [Robin Lopez](#) .

But the worst thing Blanks has done publicly has been to systematically help remove every link to the "old" days, the glory days, while trying to lay a brand new foundation on this franchise.

I agree that it was time to move on from the old days, but the way the Suns did it put a bad taste in Suns fans mouths. Certainly, more wins would wash away the bad taste, but for now all we know is that every icon has been swept out of the building since Lance Blanks signed his contract (Nash, Hill, Majerle, Gentry, etc.).

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Whose fault is that? Sarver, Babby or Blanks? All of them, of course. They are a team. But since Blanks makes the hiring decisions on the coach, and by extension his coaching staff, and since Blanks is the resident NBA talent evaluator, I think that more of the blame goes to Blanks than either of the other two for this PR debacle. And certainly, a team wholly constructed based on Blanks' talent evaluation is the worst in the Western Conference.

I didn't mean for this article to turn into a Lance Blanks hatefest, so I will stop now. I am just trying to state facts here. I have to admit that I've never sought out Lance Blanks for an interview, so a big part of my ambivalence is my own fault.

Maybe Blanks is not responsible for most of this PR problem. And certainly, teams decline with age and injury. There were reasons the team is where it is today. Valid reasons. It's no surprise to anyone that the Suns are taking their turn at the bottom of the NBA, since that's been predicted for several years now.

I digress.

Back to Babby

With Lon Babby at the helm for the next two seasons at least, he gets a chance to see the Suns move forward and start back up the hill.

More to Coro yesterday: "I may be like Moses. I'm on a journey to get to the promised land of a championship. I didn't want to leave at the start of the walk through the desert."

Babby has been judicious with contracts to help make the Suns solvent.

He declined a contract extension to [Jason Richardson](#) in the fall of 2010. Richardson wanted \$9-10 million a year. That was a good move, with Richardson already on the decline of his career. \$10 million to J-Rich right now would be an albatross. So Babby replaced him with young Marcin Gortat, 25 at the time and ready to excel at a position that's tough to fill.

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He declined to give an aging Nash \$12 million a year. Nash eventually took a lot less from the [Lakers](#), but even that \$9 million the Lakers gave Nash would have been too much for a guy you increasingly can't count on staying healthy.

He overpaid [Grant Hill](#) in the summer of 2011 to keep him one more season alongside Nash while they tried to stay competitive, but then decided it was time to get younger than 39 at the SF position.

He gave out solid contracts to every other free agent they've signed, not saddling the Suns' books with any bad contracts. Even [Michael Beasley's](#) is reasonable, only guaranteed for two seasons and barely more than the midlevel.

He offered a max contract to a guy good enough to get one in [Eric Gordon](#), and surprised the league when Gordon not only accepted the offer but expressed a great appreciation and desire to make Phoenix his home. That's a good sales job.

And he convinced Robert Sarver to use the amnesty clause on [Josh Childress](#), which would effectively cost Sarver every penny of Childress' \$7-8 twice a year for three years if they found the right players to replace Childress on the salary cap. That's a big chunk of money that Sarver just ate up.

So, Babby has been smart and safe. Nothing outrageous.

Now he just needs a good talent evaluator to pick the right players for the turnaround.

And the right coach. I really hope the Suns execute a full coaching search this spring with Lindsey Hunter as one of the candidates. You rarely get a chance to hear from a lot of people how they would handle your team, and a coaching search is a great way to do it. Then, you hire the most impressive candidate. If that's still Hunter, all the better. At least you proved it to yourself.

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**Regarding my inquiries to Suns staff: I am not a hard-nosed investigative reporter. I am a softball guy, to be sure. The most I feel comfortable doing is shooting emails to guys like Babby, asking questions and offering to meet before games to discuss further. So it's no surprise that Coro and others had the extension news way before I did - which was in the Suns' press release. Sorry, BSotS. I have a full-time day job and a moderate personality. I just don't have it in my nature to force sources to give up breaking news before anyone else knows it. I don't know how those guys get all those details about stuff before it's been released. Do they have dirt on these sources? Or are they just so persistent the source gives them the info to make them go away? I dunno. I doubt I'll ever find out.*

***Regarding Sarver's track record with President/GMs: I have no idea what happened in each of those prior negotiations. I can guess that Sarver wanted more control than Bryan C wanted to give up after his father had sold the franchise. And I can guess that both Mike D and Sarver agreed that Mike D sucked at being a GM. And I heard rumors of lowballing Kerr in 2010, but that doesn't totally explain why Kerr so quickly walked away from something that appeared to be so positive just two months before. So, we can't put all blame on Sarver "failing" at keeping President/GMs. Maybe they were all meant to be.*