

## Phoenix Suns Lon Babby has big decisions to make on General Manager, Head Coach

Written by

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Lon Babby, [Phoenix Suns](#) President of Basketball Operations (PBO), just agreed to a contract extension through the 2014-15 season. He said he wanted to finish what he started.

Now three years into his tenure, he presides over the worst basketball team in the Western Conference and no future star on the roster around whom to build the franchise. His General Manager, Lance Blanks, has only one year left on his contract and the entire coaching staff's contracts expire at the end of the season.

What Babby has started is a Suns resurgence. There's only one way to go: up. He has acquired extra draft picks and accumulated annual cap space to prepare the team to take advantage of opportunities when they arise.

Going into the summer, the Suns have two first round picks, along with about \$12 million in cap space assuming they release [Shannon Brown](#) . Without Brown, the Suns still have nine players under reasonable (movable) guaranteed contracts. But this article is not about the player personnel.

It's about the front office personnel who pick and coach the players.

Before the summer starts with the NBA Draft and free agency, Lon Babby must decide what to do with a General Manager who has not produced significant talent in three seasons on the job and, once that is decided, hire a permanent coaching staff.

The simplest path is to keep the current GM for his final season, and re-up the existing coaching staff.

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But in the most ardent writer's voice I can use, I implore Lon Babby to at least look hard (and formally) at the NBA landscape for the best possible available and interested talent in the front office and on the bench for next season.

With a chance to draft and mold a top-3 draft pick and a handful of other lottery players, plus a solid core of veterans, the Suns will be an attractive destination for aspiring GMs and coaches.

Lon Babby must appreciate this and embrace this opportunity. The same reasoning he's used for free agents to want to come to Phoenix also applies to front office positions.

I realize that I'm not in Lon Babby's shoes. I don't know what he knows. I don't have a close relationship with the existing personnel like he does, and I certainly haven't had the opportunity or need to defend them at every turn like he has for the last three seasons (in Blanks' case) and last the three months (in Hunter's case).

There is an emotional investment in the current regime reporting to Babby, and I know that it's tough to separate yourself enough to make an objective decision in these circumstances. You want your charges to excel, especially the loyal ones, and it's easy to mask over their faults and hope for the best. That's what married couples do. It's what family does.

But the Suns organization is not a family. It's a business. And businesses are expected to excel. The Suns are faced with a declining active fan base, the lifeblood of a sports franchise.

Managing partner Robert Sarver and the rest of the Suns ownership group have put their faith in Lon Babby for two more seasons. Truly, the current state of the talent on the floor is not necessarily at Lon's feet, so there's no obvious reason to release him from his duties. Someone else told him who they should sign, and how those players would fit together on the floor. Lon Babby never called himself a talent scout. He is a lawyer, a contract and trade negotiator and team executive.

The Suns are in good salary cap shape, nine draft picks in the next three years, they have moved on from the aging face of the franchise and laid a foundation for a better tomorrow with

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improved facilities and services in the arena. The areas directly related to Lon Babby's area of expertise are in good shape.

Maybe Babby is pulling the wool over my eyes but I think he's an affable, interesting guy once he stops thinking you're going to twist his words to lambaste him.

The problem is that he has no superstar reporting to him.

Hiring a superstar makes you look good, and makes your company look good. The best part about being an executive is that you get to hire folks who do the heavy lifting while you share in the credit.

Lon Babby, in my opinion, needs to recognize that his current front office does not contain that superstar. I'm not talking about a player here (which is also lacking). I am talking one prominent guy in the General Manager or Head Coach position who makes the organization better, the team better and everyone around him look better.

It's unrealistic to expect a superstar in both spots, GM and coach. But the successful teams need at least one, and the Suns have neither.

I don't know much about GM Lance Blanks behind the scenes, or his sidekick personnel boss John Treloar, or what goes into the analysis and selection process of free agency, trades and the draft. I don't know how the Suns do it.

What I do know is how to hire good people and fire good people. More than once, I've had to let go of someone I trusted and liked because they just weren't doing a good job. And more than once, I've hired a dud who interviewed great and talked a good game to me but I knew I'd made a mistake in hiring that person.

But for the most part, I've hired good people and figured out how to keep them. I find the hiring

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process to be fascinating. I recently had to replace the head of a department that wasn't performing well. The beauty of the hiring process is that I got to hear how more than a dozen quality candidates would run this department, which helped me learn more about the different ways to accomplish the same tasks.

Despite all the circumstances surrounding the team that Babby inherited in 2010, the bottom line is that the team's on-court performance has completely regressed in just about every way that has to do with general managing and coaching.

The Suns are in good salary cap shape and they have extra draft picks to work with. That's Lon's doing. He's the one that works the deals.

But the talent is lacking, which points the finger at the talent evaluator and his staff. And even more telling, the skill sets of the players brought in by Blanks do not mesh with the mindset and demands of the hand-picked coach. Hand-picked [Michael Beasley](#), the Morri and Marshall, to be specific, are not dive-on-the-floor, get-in-your-grill energy guys that hand-picked [Lindsey Hunter](#) can count on for 48 minutes of effort. They never had that reputation before being acquired and likely never will.

The coaching staff, three years into Lance Blanks' tenure, is lacking. Blanks replaced the incumbent coach with a rookie whose most obvious skillset is to demand and try to coach effort, an uphill battle with the roster that Blanks advocated. Not surprisingly, Hunter has not succeeded in this short season. The Suns just snapped a 10-game losing streak and are guaranteed the second-worst record in the franchise 40+ year history.

Every player and coach on this team is the choice of current front office, and the guy most responsible for evaluating and recommending talent is Lance Blanks.

While Lon and Lance may have a good working relationship, and while Lance may be really good at explaining his plan to Lon, the execution just is not there.

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The only reason the Suns are looking forward to high draft picks rejuvenating the talent base is because the team is so bad. Yet Lance Blanks didn't even want those high picks. From an interview with KTAR in January, Blanks said he thought the talent on the team would get them competing for the playoffs. Competing for the playoffs would have the Suns getting another mid-first draft pick - not a superstar they so desperately need.

Sure, it's a transition period. I get that. And maybe Blanks deserves a longer chance for that reason. But nothing he's done so far makes him a superstar. And the Suns need a superstar.

Lance Blanks needs to be thanked for his service and told it just didn't work out.

Lon Babby then needs to, if he hasn't started already, scour his favorite players (from his agent days, if nothing else) and other team Presidents/GMs for their recommendation on the next up-and-coming superstar GM. The next Sam Presti. The next Masai Ujiri. The next Dell Demps. The next Dennis Lindsey. The next Rob Hennigan. And so on.

Let's remember that Babby's other strong candidates for GM in the summer of 2010 were Dell Demps (since lauded as GM in New Orleans) and Dennis Lindsey (since taken over as GM in Utah). Neither guy worked out for Phoenix in it's once-unique structure of a cap guy at the helm between the owner and the GM, and Lance Blanks was eventually hired. All came from the San Antonio tree.

Lon needs to look high and low for that next superstar at GM. The great thing about searching for that guy is hearing how each of the candidates would take Lon's building blocks and move forward. The team needs a GM with a clear and executable vision of the future, to shape the personality of the team and find new superstars to take the court. There are a lot more building blocks here now (high draft pick, cap space) than there were in 2010 for the right superstar GM to shape a team.

It's not that I have any feeling one way or another about Lance Blanks as a person or as a professional. I don't even know the guy, so I recognize this is an uninformed recommendation. Maybe I'm all wrong focusing on Blanks here, but someone has to pay for the team's current position. You can't all be doing a bang-up job when you're the worst in the entire Western Conference.

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Sometimes, for the greater good, you have to make a decision you don't like.

Once a new GM is in place, that GM should hire the head coach, who will hire staff. The staff should be a group of guys who know how to develop young players because that's exactly what the Suns will have on their roster.

This does not preclude Lindsey Hunter from winning the job by any means. Hunter can, and should, get an interview with the new GM and Babby for the HC position. He should show up ready to talk exactly about what he will do with each player next year, what holes need to be filled with new personnel and how his offense and defensive schemes will take the best advantage of his personnel's skills.

The pieces are in place to make all this happen. The situation is ripe for turnover, with Babby leading that charge. The right talent evaluator could do wonders with this opportunity and the right coaching staff could develop the youth that really wants to develop.

Babby needs one or both of them to be a superstar.

That's what a guy sitting on his couch drinking coffee would do, anyway.