

Phoenix Suns coach Lindsey Hunter surprised he had to teach strong side vs. weak side

Written by

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On his weekly call-in to KTAR, err arizonasports 620, [Phoenix Suns](#) interim head coach [Lindsy Hunter](#) was asked why he's had such a tough time shoring up the Suns defense. Hunter replied that they have had to spend a surprising amount of time on basics, rather than fine-tuning.

"One of the things in particular is that guys didn't understand the strong side and weak side," Hunter said to Burns and Gambo. "The strong side is where the ball is, and the weak side is where the ball isn't. If I turn and go the other way, then I become the weak side.

"I see why sometimes we don't rotate the right way, it's because we don't understand the difference between the strong side and weak side."

Wow. How is this even possible, that guys don't know a difference like that? You learn that pretty young, I believe.

The radio guys periodically went back to this story on Friday, Doug Franz even calling his elementary school daughters (who answered the question wrong too) and suggested a potential motivation for Hunter to say something so unbelievable was to make himself look better.

Hunter has no filters, doesn't know what's right to say and what's wrong to say. He's just a guy trying to coach a team, and when they're playing bad he's not afraid to say why. Even if it means throwing his players under a bus.

Whether he's trying to make himself look better, I doubt it. He's not really cared what the media think. He knows that fans are frustrated with him mainly because of the results, and that they will be back when the team is winning again. He's not Alvin Gentry, who garnered media and

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fan loyalty even in a losing situation.

Part of the reason fans loved Gentry was because he coached the last winning Suns team. The same would be true of any coach. If the Suns are winning and Hunter is this honest, fans will call it endearing and refreshing. But when the Suns are losing and Hunter is this honest, fans call it annoying and disrespectful.

I digress. Back to the strong-side/weak-side revelation.

Maybe Hunter is just cluing us in to the realities of coaching kids who came up through the AAU circuit and weren't taught as many basics as we might think.

When I heard the interview, it sounded to me that Hunter was talking about the live-action nuances of having to recognize as quickly as possible when you change from strong to weak. All it takes is the ball swinging away from your side of the court. When a player passes cross-court, the positioning and rotation you were just executing changes on a dime. Now you're defending the weak side. Then the ball gets popped into the middle and you have to decide - did I just become a strong-side defender or am I still a weak-side defender?

But I'm not a coach, so I enlisted the help of a fellow media member, Randy Hill, who has coached and developed players for decades in California and Arizona. Hill has made observations all season from the little that the media is allowed to see.

I didn't hear the interview with Lindsey, but reading the text and having talked with him about Xs and Os in general leads me to believe his frustration has more to do with certain players not comprehending what strong-weak adjustments should be made in the immediate aftermath of ball reversals, dribble penetration, blitz-type action when the Suns go "black" on PNR, etc.

Hill, guessing that the biggest focus of BSotS readers would be on Beasley and the Morri, went on to say that Bill Self (Kansas) and Frank Martin (K-State) would have drilled the concept of "strong" and "weak" sides in college just fine, but that every defensive system has different

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reaction to each action.

Hill went on to say that Hunter's defensive scheme is a lot different than the system under Alvin Gentry, and that Hunter appears to have more of a defensive plan than the previous regime.

I do know the pack-line-style defense he's attempting to implement in the middle of the season has significantly different rules for help responsibilities than the (cough) system the Suns used before Alvin left the building. According to some of the more experienced Suns, Hunter does spend considerably more practice minutes attempting to install these concepts.

[Alvin Gentry's](#) staff spent more time on offense, and less time on positioning and footwork of the defense. The Suns organization has never been a defensive juggernaut, and Gentry didn't really attempt to change that perception.

When I asked a veteran perimeter player if these things were drilled in training camp, the player said he didn't really know -- bigs and guards rarely worked on specific defensive maneuvers on the same end of the floor.

We can debate ad nauseum the merits of completely changing a defensive scheme mid-season, but it is what it is. The Suns were one of the worst defensive teams in the league the last few years, so I can see why Hunter might want to scrap what they used to do.

With the younger guys, that's apparently been a battle. We've observed the fight between Hunter and [Michael Beasley](#) , and Hunter and [Marcus Morris](#) . There have probably been others that didn't leak to the media, but we can note that

[Markieff Morris](#)

- while still out of position a lot - has garnered more minutes in the past month than either his brother or SuperCool. Kieff seems to have committed.

Hunter is holding them accountable, and basing playing time more on their focus and effort in

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practice than we might think is warranted.

The results are poor, that's for sure. But Hunter did have the Suns at 8-13 before [Marcin Gortat](#) went down to injury and Jermaine O'Neal started missing time. It's tough to implement Hunter's defense without a post, rim-protecting presence down low and without a committed rotation to the coach's schemes.