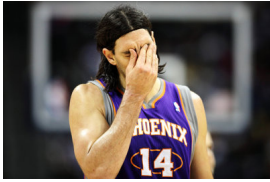


Phoenix Suns: Hunter watch still ongoing, but does it even matter?

Written by

Sunday, 21 April 2013 09:42 -



As I watch the NBA playoffs this weekend, I am struck that the 2013-14 season for the [Phoenix Suns](#) has everything and nothing to do with the head coach.

The Phoenix Suns are at such a crossroads as a franchise, one year removed from separating themselves from aging stars and three days removed from the most painful of rebuilding seasons for any franchise. Not only are the Suns one of the four worst teams in the NBA, they have a roster devoid of all-star talent - present or future.

The bleak outlook could change quickly if everything lands into place this summer. Not into a contender or even a playoff participant, per se, but at least into a roster with an upside.

Adding a top-4 pick this summer and a young high-end talent in free agency or via trade isn't enough. You need another high-end talent in next summer's draft, maybe two, and voila you've got a roster with upside. Further development from the youth already on the Suns roster would help as well. The losing is much easier to swallow if you can see a better future on the horizon.

The Suns won't turn around this team in one summer. And it's not reasonable to expect that to happen.

"In the NBA, there's nothing overnight," [Jared Dudley](#) said when he came in to clean out his locker last Thursday. "These Suns draft picks in the next two years can set you up for the next four years."

Four years is the length of a rookie contract, where the cost to pay a player can be far less than their on-court value. Of course, if you mess it up then the drought will be much longer than four years.

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"We've got to nail it," President of Basketball Operations Lon Babby said to arizonasports-620 last week.

Lon Babby knows the franchise direction is different today than it was a year ago. It's not about wins as much as planning heavily for the future.

"The note now is the future and [player] development," he told Doug and Wolf. "And what do we need to do to continue to develop young talent, and what assets can we get whether it's more draft choices or young players."

It's an asset-collection business now. You need the biggest collection of assets you can get, in order to someday take that next step.

"If you look at now how people are getting these other stars," Dudley said. "You've got to have young talent to go trade for those. You can get a [James] Harden type, even though they gave up [veteran Kevin] Martin, they gave up picks. So if you want to get those guys you're gonna have to give up young assets that are talented, that they see potential."

The Phoenix Suns have gathered some assets, but they just aren't enough to beat out a team like Houston yet. Houston had a highly-regarded pair of guys at shooting guard to give back to OKC - veteran [Kevin Martin](#) on an expiring deal, and rookie [Jeremy Lamb](#) - plus a guaranteed lottery pick via Toronto (slotted at #12 in 2013).

It's possible the Suns could have bettered that offer by parting with both Jared Dudley and [Marcin Gortat](#) along with picks, but they weren't ready to write off the season at that point.

Clearly, if the Suns had the benefit of foresight they might have come to a different conclusion.

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Maybe this year the Suns will make that plunge. Maybe they will trade any and all veterans for the promise of high-end youth, regardless of the win-loss column.

It's time to put the focus on the future, and acquiring picks and youth. Picks and youth come in exchange for veterans and their cap space.

Jared Dudley knows that's the way to go.

"We have some veterans that would be good trade bait for more of a playoff type team," he said.

Marcin Gortat knows it too. In the past, Gortat has lobbied for the return of key veterans. He wanted [Steve Nash](#) and [Grant Hill](#) back, as well as others.

But this season, he's not lobbying for the return of a key veteran that he tabbed as one shining light on a dark season.

"Listen, that's a tough question," Gortat replied, when I asked if he wanted O'Neal back next season. "I love him as a brother, as a player. He's a great great wonderful person.

"But for the organization, we need a lot of young guys. We need to go in the direction of rebuilding the team. I wish to have him but is it going to be good for our organization? I don't know. Two of the best things that happened to me this season was Jermaine O'Neal and Ralph Sampson."

With an upcoming season promising an injection of youth, and a focus on player development over wins, does it even matter who the coach is?

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Yes, in a way.

The Suns don't need a veteran, battle-tested playoff coach. They need a younger guy who will hold these AAU graduates accountable, who will teach them the right way to prepare for and play every night the same as the night before. 100% effort 100% of the time.

Is that [Lindsey Hunter](#) ? Maybe, maybe not.

I still think the bigger issue is the player evaluation staff. The guys who have to "nail it" this summer and next to re-set the trajectory of the franchise in an upward direction.

Maybe that's why the coaching decision is taking so long. By now they know if Hunter is their man or not. Maybe it's more about the rest of the front office than we are being led to believe.

Stay tuned.