

Phoenix Suns 2012-13 Player Review: Wesley Johnson

Written by

Saturday, 04 May 2013 12:14 -



To [Phoenix Suns](#) fans, [Wesley Johnson](#) was a throw-in of the [Robin Lopez](#) trade that netted the Suns a future first-round pick likely in the 15-22 range sometime before 2016. He was a necessary part of the trade, in that Minnesota required the Suns to take Wes' multi-million dollar contract to consummate the deal for the future first rounder. Fans expected nothing from Wes, so really anything he provided would be a plus.

How does a #4 overall pick fall so far in just two seasons that his team is willing to include a future first-round pick just to get a buyer to take him off their hands? Especially when that former #4 overall pick is only on the books for one more season?

You'd have to ask the recently-fired Kahn about that. The trade with the Suns gained Minnesota \$4.2 million in cap space that they were able to use in a large contract offer to [Nicolas Batum](#) (later matched by Portland) and eventually spend on [Brandon Roy](#), who was signed at the end of July but hardly played last season.

In his rookie season (2010-11), Johnson started 63 of 79 games for the Wolves next to [Michae I Beasley](#), who played the SF position. The offense ran through Beasley while Johnson stayed on the perimeter to shoot threes (nearly half of Wes' shot attempts were 3-pointers, hitting 35.6%). The Wolves won very few games and the next summer they searched for a new head coach.

"One of the selling points to Rick [Adelman] on this job when he was watching film of the team, he really liked Wes Johnson," former Wolves President David Kahn [recalled, about the hiring of Adelman in 2011](#). "And there was a lot to like about Wes. He was athletic. Even though he didn't have a ball that had a lot of rotation on it, seemed to go in from a distance. You could really see him developing into an elite defender."

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Under Adelman, in a lockout-shortened season, Wes Johnson once again started most of his team's games despite failing to produce at a high level. He started 64 of 65 games but played only 22 minutes per contest, and averaged a meager 6.1 points on 39.8% shooting (31% on threes, once again nearly half of his shot attempts). Fans were [baffled over Adelman's mancrush on Johnson](#)

Given that Wes Johnson was already 24, the Wolves knew they didn't have a future star on their hands so they got another team to take him and his contract.

"I just think one of the things we missed was I'm not sure at the time his commitment was what was necessary," Kahn [said last week after being dismissed as team President](#) .

Judging Wes with respect to his peers

First, let's look at his peers on the Phoenix Suns - other guys who could play the shooting guard position. Much like in Minnesota in his first two years, Johnson didn't have much quality competition. None of [Shannon Brown](#) , [Ja red Dudley](#)

or

[P.J. Tucker](#)

is a starting quality NBA shooting guard that demands the attention of the opposing team.

Per 35 Minutes		Points	Reb	Ass	Stl	Blk	TOV	FT	3P	2P	ORtg	DRtg
1	Shannon Brown	20.2	27.7	22.1	1.6	0.7	2.0	77.5	35.2	52.2	11.2	10.1
2	Ja red Dudley	17.7	20.0	12.1	0.5	0.4	1.8	75.0	33.3	48.3	10.5	9.8
3	Wesley Johnson	16.3	15.1	10.5	0.7	0.3	1.9	72.5	31.1	45.1	9.8	9.1
4	P.J. Tucker	12.7	10.1	10.0	0.5	0.4	1.2	70.0	28.6	42.1	9.1	8.5

None of these guys are world beaters. Clearly, Dudley has the highest productivity and he did not like losing minutes to Wesley Johnson this past season.

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"How I always feel is that the best people should play," Dudley said after the season ended, regarding his diminished role in the second half. "That doesn't mean the best people should start because that's not how it is, but you should play the most minutes. If Wes [Johnson] or P.J. Tucker, if they produce more than me then they should play more. And I think for the most part when Lindsey took over my role diminished a little bit and that's fair because we were out of playoff contention.

"But I definitely think I should play more minutes because I was the best wing."

While Dudley was frustrated, it was really Shannon Brown who lost everything when Johnson got his chance. Yet even factoring in Johnson's poor(er) shooting first-half, the two are pretty even across the board. And Johnson is two years younger.

You could say Johnson is the antithesis of Shannon Brown. Shannon Brown is more than ready to try to throw his team on his back and carry the scoring load (note the emphasis on the word "try"). Brown tends to toss out the offensive play call as he dribbles himself into a tougher shot than he started with.

Wes Johnson, on the other hand, won't take over a game but he's always where he's supposed to be, staying within the scheme and producing within his comfort level. Johnson is predictable, and coaches love that. Short of stardom, you pray for consistency. As a coach, if you know what you're going to get, you can spend more time on getting the most out of the matchups and second units. That's why Johnson started nearly every game for [Kurt Rambis](#) , [Rick Adelman](#) and

[Lindsey Hunter](#)

. Only

[Alvin Gentry](#)

eschewed Johnson for any other player on the roster. In each case, the coach was resolute in his decision, yet in each case the coach agreed there had to be better guys out there in free agency.

Now, let's compare Wes Johnson to other shooting guards in the Pacific Division.

Here's where you see that the Suns could do a lot better than anything they've currently got on

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their roster.

Per 36 Minutes																					
	PTS	FG%	3P%	FT%	ORB	DRB	TRB	AST	STL	BLK	TOV	PF	PPG								
1. Mike Brown	2012-13	34.76	79	2012	8.8	18.1	468	5.5	4.5	309	6.2	7.3	8.09	8.8	4.4	5.2	1.3	0.3	3.4	1.1	20.1
2. Grant Hill	2012-13	32.76	78	2012	15.16	16.6	498	5.4	6.4	378	5.4	6.4	8.75	8.8	5.7	2.1	1.1	0.5	2.4	1.0	20.2
3. Brandon Roy	2012-13	34.76	79	2012	14.16	16.6	465	5.1	5.2	453	5.2	5.5	8.00	8.7	5.1	5.8	1.5	0.1	2.9	2.4	21.4
4. Steve Nash	2012-13	22.18	81	2012	6.1	12.7	409	5.4	2.4	308	5.4	4.0	7.75	8.8	5.1	5.1	4.1	1.6	0.5	2.3	14.1
5. Wesley Johnson	2012-13	25.90	21	2012	10.5	10.5	407	5.8	5.8	323	5.8	5.8	8.8	8.8	4.8	4.8	1.3	0.8	0.7	1.8	13.1

U.G.L.Y. Clearly, the Suns could use an upgrade at the shooting guard position. Sure, Johnson is younger than Bryant and Crawford, but his upside is pretty much what we see right now.

Grade for Johnson in relation to peers: D

Judging Wes' improvement on the season

In Phoenix, Wes Johnson finished up the season much the same way he played his first two seasons, except it was a little bit better.

Johnson scored in double figures in 17 of the Suns last 29 games, putting up 13.4 points in 21 starts (29 minutes per game). Compared to averages of 9 and 6 points in two starting seasons in Minnesota, this was a step up. He took more shots per game, upping his per-36 scoring numbers despite while shooting a little better (42.9%) than before.

That's progress.

You can also credit Johnson for handling the benching during the first half of the season with professionalism. While others complained about diminished roles and unfilled personal expectations, Johnson remained calm and patient even during his free agency year.

Grade for Johnson's improvement: B

Judging Wes based on expectations

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We expected nothing from Wes Johnson. Zilch. Nada. He was a throw-in. Even the Suns front office didn't expect much, declining to guarantee his 2013-14 season and making him a free agent this summer. And in the first 45 games, Johnson barely sniffed the court.

But when the Suns sucked the big one, and the shooting guards playing ahead of Johnson were either long-term known quantities with low ceilings (Dudley) or short-term known quantities with low ceilings (Shannon Brown), the Suns rolled the dice to see what they had in Johnson.

As it turns out, what they had was a guy just as good as anyone else who could play that position while also being predictable night in and night out.

To me, that exceeded any expectations we might have had. He's not a star, but he's not the worst player in the game (as had been assumed early in the season)

Grade for exceeding expectations: B

Overall grade

Wes Johnson is a laid-back dude. He's very quiet and unassuming. He doesn't beat his chest, or rally a team, or throw them on his back to carry them to victory. He's soft-spoken, often making media lean in closer than usual to try to pick up the audio.

He's not the best player on any court - though there were times in the last couple months he appeared to be the best player for minutes at a time - but he's not a guy that drives you crazy either.

Is he worth his rookie fourth-year contract of \$5.4 million? No. That's why it wasn't picked up.

Is he worth the money the Suns gave Shannon Brown last summer (\$3.5 million/year)? No, probably not.

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But is the worth having as a cheap, second or third-string shooter who can fill in as a starter in case of injury, for \$1-3 million/year? Yes. Most definitely.

He's not a sexy pic. But Wesley Johnson is a viable NBA player and that's better than we thought six months ago.

Overall grade: C-