

## Phoenix Suns go from middle-aged last year to one of youngest this season, but lack a true leader

Written by

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Let's start with a trivia question: which [Phoenix Suns](#) team in the last four seasons played the highest number of young players in its regular rotation?

Was it the 2012-13 Suns team that went 25-57 season, worst in the West and their third consecutive year out of the playoffs, who spent most of the second half of their season with the sole purpose of going young?

Or, was it the 2009-10 Suns team that went 54-28 in the last hurrah of a storied mid-decade run of six consecutive winning seasons, led by 36 year old [Steve Nash](#) and 34 year old [Grant Hill](#) ?

### What exactly is "young" anyway?

Well, "young" is a subjective term. I realize that. For the purpose of this article, I'm going to consider a player "young" if he **played the season at 24 years old or younger**.

In the most simplistic terms, players 25 years of age or older in the NBA are unlikely to become a much better player than they already are (on a per-minute basis). Sure, there are exceptions. Steve Nash went from a 28-year old middling starter in Dallas to the league MVP in Phoenix at age 29. But for every Steve Nash, there are at least 100 NBA players who don't improve demonstrably after age 24 unless their previous struggles were due to injury or lack of opportunity.

Let's use an example. Most would agree that the Morris twins, who played last season at age 23, are close to their apex as NBA players. Even those who think they can get better would wholeheartedly agree that it needs to happen this season or it never will. This season, they will play at the age of 24.

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But if you don't agree with my highly arbitrary subjective logic, just bear with me. Deciding where to draw the line is actually immaterial to the impact of this article. Wherever you draw the line, the Phoenix Suns were old last year compared to other lottery teams.

Let's go with "young" being 24 years of age or younger during the majority of the season in question.

## The 2012-13 Phoenix Suns

Last year's Suns were the [second oldest non-playoff team in the NBA](#) (second to Dallas), but right in the middle of the pack of the entire league. (as of games in early April 2013)

	Age	Team	Last 10 games	Lottery position?	Lottery last 5 yrs?	Top 10 picks last 5 yrs?
1	23.5	CHA	2.8	X	4	4
2	24.0	ORL	2.9	X	0	0
3	24.8	IND	2.7	X	2	2
4	24.4	PHO	5.5	X	2	2
5	24.4	PHO	5.5	X	3	0
6	24.4	CLE	2.7	X	2	3
7	24.7	UTA	3.6	X	1	2
8	24.9	TOR	3.6	X	4	4
9	25.1	PHI	4.6	X	1	1
10	25.2	ORW	6.6	X	5	3
11	25.3	IND	6.4	X	3	1
12	25.6	SAC	4.5	X	5	4
13	25.7	DET	0.9	X	3	3
14	25.8	MIA	3.7	X	5	6
15	25.9	WAS	5.5	X	4	3
16	26.1	PHO	5.6	X	3	0
17	26.8	ORL	10.0			
18	26.6	MIL	6.4			
19	26.6	OKC	8.3			
20	27.3	ATL	4.7			
21	27.5	MEM	7.3			
22	27.5	CHI	3.5			
23	28.6	SAS	6.2			
24	28.6	NETS	5.4			
25	28.9	BOS	6.3			
26	29.3	LAC	4.4			
27	29.6	OKC	7.3	X	0	0
28	30.2	NYK	5.6			
29	30.2	MIA	11.0			
30	31.4	LAL	7.3			

If it looks awful to you, it is. Only Dallas made the Suns look baby-faced by comparison. As you can see in the chart, the Suns were one of only three lottery teams without a top-ten pick in the last decade (Dallas, Orlando). Generally, once you're in the lottery and getting top-ten picks, you're likely to stay there a while.

Dallas continued on the Suns' treadmill last season, playing an old roster just enough to finish barely outside the playoffs. Orlando, on the other hand, tanked like a futhermucker. They went from deep playoff capable to second-worst in the entire league in less than 12 months, thanks to turning [Dwight Howard](#) into a bevy of young talent. The [Lakers](#) had already traded their picks to Phoenix, so they had to sign up Philly (and Denver) to fork over the necessary young talent. A year later, only Orlando has anything of value to show for the big trade. Ouch.

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The Suns are somewhere between Dallas and Orlando, even a year later. But at least now they are closer to Orlando, where they belong, until the next big star hits the Valley.

### Trivia!

Back to the trivia question: which Phoenix Suns team in the last three seasons played the highest number of young players in its regular rotation - the 2009-10 Western Conference Finals team or the 2012-13 Worst in the West team?

The fact is that the 2009-10 Suns team played more young guys in their rotation than last year's Suns. Yes, I'm talking about the 2009-10 Suns team that won more games in their last 35 attempts (28-7) than last year's model did in 82 (25-57). Ouch.

**2009-10 - THREE guys under 25 made the top TEN** in minutes per game. Record 54-28

- [Jared Dudley](#) , 24, 6th in minutes per game (24.3 per game for 82 games, 1 start)
- [Robin Lopez](#) , 21, 7th in minutes per game (19.3 per game for 51 games, 31 starts)
- [Goran Dragic](#) , 23, 8th in minutes per game (18.0 per game for 80 games, 2 starts)

**2012-13 - TWO guys under 25 made the top TEN** in minutes per game. Record 25-57

- [Markieff Morris](#) , 23, 7th in minutes per game (22.4 per game for 82 games, 32 starts)
- [Michael Beasley](#) , 24, 8th in minutes per game (20.7 per game for 75 games, 20 starts)
- 3 others under 25 played a grand total of 1,221 minutes (Mook, Marshall, Garrett)

Before you raise your hand to ask, the answer is no. No, the Suns did not do any better in the "youth" department during Nash's last two seasons either. In 2010-11, the same three young guys played top-ten minutes, and in 2011-12 Robin Lopez lost all his minutes and didn't even qualify for the top ten, while Dragic played terribly and got traded at the deadline. At least, 2011-12 brought us Markieff Morris.

*\*Sidenote: Jared Dudley only counted as "young" for the purposes of this article in 2009-10, becoming a "veteran" in subsequent years. Fits, doesn't it? Dudley did not improve his*

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*per-minute numbers. He just got more of them until last season.*

### Inside the numbers

#### Lack of quantity

The Suns biggest problem in the past decade was lack of quantity of draft picks, coupled with holding onto their aging veterans for longer than they probably should have.

Thanks to only two first-round picks in three years from 2010-12, and those each being #13 overall, the Suns had little homegrown talent to develop.

#### Lack of quality

Last summer, the Suns tried to address the lack of quantity of young players, so they worked hard to bring in new, young blood all the way through the trade deadline. The Suns acquired the #2 overall pick in 2009, #5 overall in 2010 and #14 overall in 2011.

But while the youth they brought in checked the boxes on paper, the players themselves were wholly underwhelming.

**Here's the biggest punch in the gut:** not one Suns player 24 years old or younger has played starters minutes in Phoenix since 2007 (when Stoudemire, Diaw and Barbosa were all 24 years old). Since then, the best any young player has done was 6th best on the team in minutes per game.

That's a long time since the Suns have had a starting quality young talent in Phoenix, hombres.

### The new, "young" Suns

*\*Note: ages in this section are for the majority of NEXT season, so you'll see a lot of guys listed one year older than you thought they were.*

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If nothing else this season, expect to see at least one young player ( [Eric Bledsoe](#) , 24 next season) play starter minutes each night for the first time since 2007. In addition to Bledsoe, the Suns have several other young players who might crack the regular 10-man rotation.

The way I see it, it's a good bet that at least FOUR of the SEVEN\* guys under 25 next season will be in the Suns' top ten player rotation: Eric Bledsoe (24), [Archie Goodwin](#) (19), Markieff Morris (24) and [Marcus Morris](#) (24).

*\* [Malcolm Lee](#) is 24 next season, but nothing has been said of Lee by the brass so I assume he's gone soon. [Alex Oriakhi](#) is not yet signed to a contract. [Miles Plumlee](#) , [Dionte Garrett](#) and Michael Beasley all turn 25 before next season starts, so they don't count as "young" for this article.*

This is a big year for Bledsoe and the Morrii. They will be playing next season at age 24, the point at which most players become who they are in the NBA. At the end of the 2012-13 season, we will be pretty confident what we have in these three players for the rest of their careers.

The remaining young players, Goodwin, [Alex Len](#) (20) and [Kendall Marshall](#) (22), will get a chance to play but would only get big minutes if they show great progression in training camp. Goodwin won a lot of trust from Hornacek in Summer League, so I think he's got the leg up on those other two for a top-ten spot in the rotation.

But to expect all as SIX of these guys to be top-ten players in terms of minutes per game is a tough task unless the Suns do further purging (which they might). But watch out - sometimes you get what you wish for. Only one NBA team had 6 of their top ten players under 25 years old last year (sorted in order of win total).

- 20-win Orlando had FOUR guys under 25 in their TOP TEN minutes per game last season ( [Tobias Harris](#) , [Nikola Vucevic](#) , Maurice Harkless, E'Twan Moore) - rotation: 24 years old
- *Harris joined the team only in the second half, from Milwaukee for J.J. Reddick*

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- 21-win Charlotte had FIVE ( [Kemba Walker](#) , [Bismack Biyombo](#) , [Byron Mullens](#) , [Michael Kidd-Gilchrist](#) , Jeffrey Taylor) - 23.5
- 24-win Cleveland had FOUR ( [Kyrie Irving](#) , [Tristan Thompson](#) , [Dion Waiters](#) , [Tyler Zeller](#) ) - 24.4
- **25-win Phoenix had TWO (Morris, Beasley) - 26.1**
- 27-win New Orleans had SIX ( [Ryan Anderson](#) , Robin Lopez, [Anthony Davis](#) , [Eric Gordon](#) , Al-Faruq Aminu, [Austin Rivers](#) ) - 24.3
- 28-win Sacramento had FOUR ( [Tyreke Evans](#) , [DeMarcus Cousins](#) , [Isaiah Thomas](#) , [Patrick Patterson](#) ) - 25.6
  - *Patterson joined the team only in the second half, from Houston for [Thomas Robinson](#)*
- 29 win Washington had FOUR ( [John Wall](#) , [Bradley Beal](#) , [Jordan Crawford](#) , [Kevin Seraphin](#) ) - 25.9
  - *Crawford was traded to Boston at the trade deadline*
- 29-win Detroit had FOUR ( [Greg Monroe](#) , [Brandon Knight](#) , [Kyle Singler](#) , [Andre Drummond](#) ) - 25.7
- 31-win Minnesota had FOUR ( [Kevin Love](#) , [Ricky Rubio](#) , [Derrick Williams](#) , [Alexey Shved](#) ) - 25.8
- 33-win Portland had FIVE ( [Damian Lillard](#) , [Nicolas Batum](#) , [J.J. Hickson](#) , Myers Leonard, [Victor Claver](#) ) - 24.4
- For grins, three playoff teams had a younger playing rotation than the Suns' 26.1 year old lineup
- 45-win Houston had SIX under 25 ( [James Harden](#) , [Chandler Parsons](#) , [Jeremy Lin](#) , Patrick Patterson, Marcus Morris, [Patrick Beverley](#) ) - with a 24.4 year old average
  - *Patterson and Mook Morris left the team at the trade deadline, while Beverley only joined the top ten after the deadline*
- 47-win Golden State had FIVE under 25 ( [Stephen Curry](#) , [Klay Thompson](#) , [Harrison](#)

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[Barnes](#)  
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,  
[Draymond Green](#)

) - 25.2

- 49-win Indiana had TWO ( [Paul George](#) , [Lance Stephenson](#) ) - 25.3

Why didn't the worst NBA teams play even more young players big minutes? That's twofold. For one, not many teams even had that many NBA caliber players under 25 to throw out there.

For another, it's about playing the right way, per Amin Elhassan (formerly in the Suns front office, now a scout and journalist for ESPN Insider).

"One of the most nuanced elements of tanking," Amin said. "Is the art of being bad without learning bad habits; without it, you are stuck in a vicious cycle of bad basketball."

Even the youngest of the young, New Orleans with SIX of their top ten players under 25, had to mix in some veterans to keep order in the clubhouse.

But won't those veterans drive up the win rate? Uh no. Just look at the Suns, who won only 25 games despite playing giving big minutes to older veterans without a big upside. But if you have the **right** veterans, they can set the proper tone for the kids to follow.

"There definitely needs to be culture setting from your leadership (ownership, front office, coaching)," Amin continued. "And it needs to be consistent, and consistently applied. But beyond that, successful team cultures almost always feature a 'champion of the cause' from inside the locker room aka players policing their own.

"That policing doesn't necessarily require a vet playing 30 minutes a night, but his voice can certainly be diminished if he is racking up DNPs. Younger players need to be able to respect the

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vets for not only their sage advice, but also for the fact that they can bust your [expletive deleted] on the court if need be."

The Suns need to play their young guys, but they can't force feed them into the lineup ahead of better players who happen to be vets. Jared Dudley lost some influence last season because he was losing minutes to the very guys who needed a kick in the pants. Yet the veterans who kept their minutes (Gortat, Dragic) failed to step up to the lead the team either.

There needs to be a pecking order that includes respect. At this point, the culture setting on the 2013-14 Suns is going to have to come from Jeff Hornacek and his band of merry assistants. On the court, the only leader-type players on the roster are [Caron Butler](#) , [Channing Frye](#) and Goran Dragic.

Beyond that, it's a daycare center.