

Phoenix Suns' head coach Jeff Hornacek talks memories and mentors

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Our younger readers don't have a recollection of Hornacek's time as a member of the Phoenix Suns. Unless you're around my age (34) or older then it was before your time. Let this be a glimpse into Jeff's thoughts about a portion of Suns' history prior to your fandom. For the readers older more experienced than me, without getting mawkish, this will hopefully refresh your memory of a great era of Suns' basketball. Some people's favorite era.

The Drug Scandal

"I have great memories from when I was here in Phoenix. When I was a rookie we had basically five draft picks that year and four of us made it. Myself, Rafael Addison, Kenny Gattison and William Bedford, so that was a time where this was all new to us playing in the NBA," said Hornacek. "Then we had, obviously, the drug scandal that happened."

This was the darkest hour of Suns' basketball. An eclipse of epic proportions. A drug scandal involving current and former Suns' players was a blight on the team. A more thorough examination of these events can be read in a Sports Illustrated article [here](#) .

"The biggest thing was Kenny Gattison and Rafael Addison and I would ride to practice every day. We lived in the same apartment complex. When we came into practice all of a sudden all of the media came flying at us and we were like, "What the heck's going on?" and we were the guys standing there like, "OK, we had no idea." We were just sitting there kind of minding our own business, young guys, young players."

Talk about being blindsided showing up to work. This type of chaos surely shook every person in the organization, but it was probably even more difficult for the young players to comprehend. The current leadership of the Suns has talked about developing a culture that fosters growth and development in its players. This was not that culture.

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"That was something that was a great memory, not really a great memory, but one that really influenced our thought of the NBA and that you need to go on your own course and work as hard as you can at your game and not worry about some of the other stuff that is going on. It was really some bad times at that point. Then, when we made the trade for Kevin Johnson, Mark West and Tyrone Corbin. Cotton Fitzsimmons comes in and everything kind of seemed to be headed in the right direction."

The Rebuild and the 90's Playoffs

The palingenesis of the team in such a brief interval was a convergence of new management, Jerry Colangelo, new (old) coaching, Cotton Fitzsimmons, and brilliant talent acquisitions, Kevin Johnson, Eddie Johnson, Tom Chambers, Mark West and Dan Majerle. Some may even remember a rookie from the University of Arizona named Steve Kerr.

"I always thought I was going to be a guy who played my whole career in Phoenix, I was obviously naïve to that fact, but I was the only guy they had kept from that whole time. Once we made the trade for Kevin and those guys everybody was gone except for me. There were times we thought we had a chance to win a championship, but couldn't get over the hump," lamented Hornacek. "That Portland series always rings a bell in my mind, in 1990, but the whole trade thing was something where I thought it was a great deal for Phoenix. Obviously we needed a power, post-up player and Barkley fit that mold. Unfortunately, it was me that me that was in on the deal."

The deal sent Hornacek, Tim Perry and Andrew Lang to Philadelphia for troubled superstar Charles Barkley. I shared with Jeff that I can still remember exactly where I was when the news broke on June 17, 1992... 6 years to the day when the Suns originally drafted him. Little league baseball was in swing at my junior high school, but I didn't have a game that night, so I was playing basketball on the courts that separated two of the fields. Someone came onto the courts and told me the news, obviously this was just prior to the invention of twitter, and it spread across the ball fields like wildfire. I can still remember feeling conflicted. While the Suns had acquired what may have been the final piece in their championship puzzle, they had just traded the longest tenured Sun and my favorite basketball player.

"It was just something that I thought would never happen. I told the story before that I would have traded myself. When I was in Seattle we were exercising and I told myself that was the guy that we need and that's who we (the Suns - notice the use of we) ended up with. That was

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just one of the things that I remember here in Phoenix. I thought that maybe at some point I'd end up back here, but the way things turned out, with my six years in Utah and a having a couple of chances at championships, it worked out for me. I didn't know if I'd ever be back in the Phoenix Suns' organization, so it was great when they called me to interview and I talked with Robert, Lon and Ryan and it seemed like it would be a good fit for me and a good fit for them. So on we go."

I felt that Jeff seemed evidently despondent when describing his ouster. Just my take.

"The one play that always sticks out to me is when we played the Lakers in the playoffs in LA. We were up by a couple points with 30 seconds left in the game and I had the ball on the wing and ran a pick and roll with Mark West and a couple guys jumped out at me, I think it was Worthy and Magic Johnson, and left Mark wide open and I dumped it to him. He dunked it and basically that was the game and ended the series, in LA (emphasis), which was huge for us and all our young guys running off the court."

Jeff's memory is a little bit hazy. It was 1:09, not 30 seconds. Look at the 7:28 point on the video for the play Hornacek is referring to. Jeff also hit four clutch free throws coming down the stretch. I personally enjoyed when the announcer said, "If Phoenix wins this series you can point to the play of Jeff Hornacek."

Here's the video of the closing moments, because I'm sure everyone will want to reminisce over/experience the Suns closing out the Lakers on their home floor.

"We were so excited, to get back on the plane to come back to Phoenix. The airport was

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packed, there were 10-15,000 people at the airport welcoming us back. It was a battle. To me, at that time it wasn't just the Suns against the Lakers. It was Phoenix against LA. Not to sound country, but it was the small town versus the big town, and I think that was part of why the city was so excited at that point. That one play sticks out in my memory as the biggest play."

That's right, Jeff. Beat LA.

Coaching Philosophy

"I think everything I do as a coach comes from somebody. You learn everything as you're growing up. My dad was a coach and I learned a lot from him. Johnny Orr from Iowa St. made the game fun. John Macleod gave me great responsibility in calling plays on the court as a rookie."

Hornacek was a great distributor as a two and that contributed to the success of two of the great backcourt duos of all time. Kevin Johnson and Hornacek combined for 16.4 assists per game in the 1989-90 season. In 1994-95 with Stockton it was 16.6. Last season, the Suns starting backcourt averaged 10. That's if you count Dudley as the starting shooting guard, because his 2.6 per game was third highest on the team behind Kendall Marshall. Hornacek, despite declining assist numbers in the second half of his career, averaged 4.9 assists per game for his career. Having play making abilities definitely added to being a near career 50/40/90 player (.496/.403/.877) and made Jeff an invaluable commodity.

"Cotton was a guy that not only made the game fun, but was a guy that was always trying to build his players' confidence and got the most out of his players in that way. Guys loved to play for him," said Hornacek. "We were a team that nobody cared who scored. One night it might be Tom Chambers would score 30-35 points, the next night it would be Kevin Johnson who scored 30-35, the next night I might have had 30, the next night EJ might have had 30."

That was just like last season for the Suns except the complete opposite.

"To us, it didn't matter who scored, it was all about winning the game and playing the game the

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right way. Making the right pass. We were all happy for each other and I thought Cotton really brought that to the team, so I learned that from him."

This will be something to keep an eye on next season. Can Hornacek get his players to buy in and play for each other, rather than having an "I'm gonna get mine" attitude? It seems it may have been easier to buy into a team concept when Jeff came into the league because there wasn't the privilege, coddling and stupid money that permeates the current environment. Last season wasn't necessarily a model of teamwork and selflessness.

"Jerry Sloan just instructed us night in and night out - never take a play off. It didn't matter if it was the beginning of the game or the end of the game. It didn't matter what the lead was," reflected Hornacek. "He told us, "If you can walk into the locker room after the game and look in the mirror and say that you laid it all out there on every play tonight and we still lost, then so be it, but at least you can still look yourself in the mirror and know you put out full effort." These are some of the things that I've learned from all of my coaches that I learned as a player that I will continue to use as a coach.

Hornacek finished the interview discussing his former coaches and sounded passionate about the lessons he had learned from them. I look for that passion to extend into his time roaming the sidelines this season. Based on his pedigree he has a great foundation to embark on this next challenge in his life.