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The [Phoenix Suns](#) have had quite a busy offseason. Lost amidst all the draft picks, trades, and uniform changes, an underrated aspect of the team's summer has been the formation of a strong coaching staff. On June 25, the Suns named four new Assistant Coaches to Jeff Hornacek's staff: Jerry Sichting (former Assistant for Washington), Kenny Gattison (former Assistant for Atlanta), Mark West (formerly VP of Player Programs for Phoenix), and [Mike Longabardi](#) (former Assistant for Boston).

These four coaches bring a great deal of experience to the Suns' bench. However, one of them has never played in the NBA; yet, he is also the only one to have NBA championship experience as part of a coaching staff: Mike Longabardi.

Background

Longabardi may be the youngest and smallest coach on the Suns' bench next season, but don't let his stature fool you. He is a defensive guru who possesses significant basketball knowledge and NBA experience that is sure to help this young Suns team. After seven years as an Assistant Coach at the collegiate level, Longabardi began his NBA career with the [Houston Rockets](#), where he worked for four seasons with increasing levels of responsibility: Assistant Video Coordinator, Video Coordinator, and Assistant Coach/Video Coordinator.

Longabardi then joined the [Boston Celtics](#) before the 2007-08 season, coinciding with the arrival of [Kevin Garnett](#) and [Ray Allen](#) in Boston and start of the Celtics' "Big 3" era. As an Assistant Coach, he helped Associate Head Coach [Tom Thibodeau](#) install the vaunted defense that led the Celtics to their first title in 22 years. After Thibodeau left the Celtics to become the [Chicago Bulls](#)' Head Coach in 2010, Longabardi remained in [Doc Rivers](#)' staff, assisting another great defensive mind in [Lawrence Frank](#) for the 2010-11 season.

New Assistant Coach Mike Longabardi Talks About Bringing a Defensive Mindset to the Phoenix Suns

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In 2011, Longabardi was promoted to a bench coaching role, replacing Lawrence Frank as the Defensive Coordinator for the Boston Celtics, a role which he maintained until joining the Suns earlier this summer. Even with an aging roster, Longabardi had the Celtics play stifling defense in his two seasons as Defensive Coordinator. Boston was 2nd and 6th in the league in defensive efficiency rankings in [2011-12](#) and [2012-13](#), respectively.

Now part of Head Coach Jeff Hornacek's staff in Phoenix, Mike Longabardi discussed with me his role as the Suns' new defensive guru.

From Boston to Phoenix

To kick things off, I asked Mike to describe **the experience of being part of the Celtics' 2007-08 championship squad and how it helped him as a coach:**

"When I began in Boston, I was an Assistant Coach helping Doc and Tom. That year, we knew we had a great team but even we were surprised at how quickly it came together. We ran into some bumps in the first couple rounds of the playoffs but after that, it was smooth. It was a great year and a great experience overall."

Building on his experience in Boston, we then discussed **how coaching an experienced veteran team like the 2007-2013 Celtics is different from coaching a young, relatively inexperienced Suns team:**

We have to take it step by step and can't skip a single one. I know it's a process that I'm going to be patient with -Mike Longabardi

"It's definitely an adjustment. With a young team like the Suns, you have to take baby steps with

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the goal that someday, we get to the point that an experienced team like the Celtics were at. Guys like [Caron Butler](#) will help with that. It's a process and I know we can never get too far ahead. We have to take it step by step and can't skip a single one. In the back of my mind, I know it's a process that I'm going to be patient with."

Teaching Defense to THE Phoenix Suns?

Mike has spent several years learning from Doc Rivers and has great experience assisting renowned defensive coaches like Tom Thibodeau and Lawrence Frank. With the Suns, his primary responsibility will be to control the defensive end of the court. On a team that was among the [bottom ten in the NBA in terms of defensive efficiency](#) last year, that will be no easy task. Mike knows this, and much like Jeff Hornacek and GM Ryan McDonough have stated recently, he also knows that much of this season's "success" will be measured not necessarily in wins and losses, but in terms of effort and progress. With you youth and inexperience on the team,

he spoke of the importance of teaching defensive effort and fundamentals:

"Teaching defensive values will be a day-to-day effort. There's no magic wand to immediately get there. That goes for offense too because both sides of the court are connected. If you don't take a good shot on offense, it's going to hurt you on defense. Likewise, if you don't play good defense, you're going to get a worse shot on offense. We're going to have to get consistent effort. We know that there are going to be some nights that we might lose because we're overmatched with talent. But the important thing is to give effort and see progress."

Building on the relationship between offense and defense, we then discussed the Suns' stated [desire to push the pace](#)

and score at a high rate this season. I joked with Mike that to many Suns fans, the words "high-scoring" bring flashbacks of the "7 seconds or less" teams, who were often (fairly or unfairly) chastised for their perceived lack of defense. I asked Mike

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how he's going to instill a defensive philosophy in a team that wants to run:

The team that gets the most easy shots is the one that wins. So your job on defense is to make it hard for the other team to score. -Mike Longabardi

"Well, you can't play fast all the time. You want to play fast to score easy points but you can't play reckless. You have to play to your strengths. Talent determines how a team should play. Taking bad shots makes it harder on defense (and vice versa). It's important to remember that in order to score, you have to get the ball, which you do by playing defense. When it comes down to it, it's tough to win playing at a high pace all the time. The game becomes a chess match in the playoffs, where execution is vital. The team that gets the most easy shots is the one that wins. So your job on defense is to make it hard for the other team to score."

The Defensive Potential of a Dragic-Bledsoe Backcourt

In our conversation about defense, Mike and I also discussed the team's plans to play [Goran Dragic](#)

and

[Eric Bledsoe](#)

, two players with point guard skillsets, together as the starting backcourt. Dragic is 6'3" with a 6'7" wingspan, while Bledsoe is just 6'1" but has phenomenal length for his size with a 6'7.5" wingspan. Although both players are long, quick, and athletic, I asked Mike how the Suns would deal with

defensive mismatches they might face when playing opposing teams with bigger shooting guards:

"Hopefully, their quickness and talent makes up for it. Those guys will learn to be prepared defensively and I will help them prepare. If for some reason we find that the pairing isn't working defensively at some point, it's our job to find a fix. And that goes for every player. Every man will have to be prepared defensively and will have to help cover guys on defense. But the hope with this backcourt is that their quickness and speed provide an advantage for us, making the other team adjust first.

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Thoughts on Phoenix and the Suns Organization

It's hard to fathom that it has only been just over one month since the Suns hired their new crop of assistant coaches. As a self-proclaimed "east coast guy," Mike Longabardi is still getting used to the three hour time zone difference but is otherwise loving Phoenix.

"It's been great. I love the warm weather. My family loves it here and I couldn't be happier. Coming from Boston, I was glad I didn't have to pack a shovel."

Speaking specifically about the Suns franchise, he said, "Everybody has been great to me. The potential is so good here. I'm excited. We're set up well with cap room and trades and we're putting ourselves in good position."

Mike then asked me if he would be seeing me around on game days. When I told him that I (unfortunately) am not from Phoenix, he said that I "should be excited" about what the future has in store for the Suns. In fact, our conversation ended on a note of great optimism (to continue the trend of the Suns' summer thus far, save for [this guy](#)) with Mike stating "We're going to put the time in and take no shortcuts. It's great to be a part of this. Everybody should be excited."

*As a bonus, I recommend that fans watch [this video](#) of a talk Longabardi delivered to Amherst College's Athletic Leadership Development Program, where he speaks about his responsibilities as the manager of a team's defense.