

Written by

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Between the nervous excitement, fun signs in the crowd (REFS YOU NEED GLASSES in an optical chart form, awesome), and energy in the building, Russ Pennell and the Phoenix Mercury were victorious in his coaching debut. The team knocked off the the Tulsa Shock to begin what has to be a second half of penitence for the team...

"I asked them if they are all that hard," new head coach Russ Pennell after a 70-67 debut win over the Tulsa Shock. "It was fun. I really enjoyed the energy in the arena and the fans were great. I thought the ladies played extremely hard."

After three debuts in the Valley between the University of Arizona (2008), Grand Canyon University (2009), and now with the Mercury (2013) there have been a few "first games" for Pennell as a head coach here.

In terms of in-state debuts Coach Pennell is now technically 3-0, a feat that will be hard to attempt to match in the future for any coach. All three times Coach Pennell has walked into an arena in the state of Arizona with a new team he has won whether it was against the likes of Florida Atlantic, Western Washington, or now in the WNBA against the Shock. He has been received by his new players and the fans each time. In return he has rewarded them with a victory.

This atmosphere was very different as a former men's college basketball coach, but at the same time very familiar.

As a father of two young ladies Coach Pennell is used to both the athletic world and how to manage a locker room of women. The transition to the WNBA looks odd on the surface with his overall experience and resume, but it makes more sense than meets the eye.

## The Phoenix Mercury win in Russ Pennell's WNBA debut showing positive signs for the team going forward

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It is early in the process (48 hours in), but the team is moving in the right direction. -Coach Pennell

The WNBA has rabid fans that are as loyal as they come. They are more connected with the product and the teams with the way the product is presented. The players are not sheltered and full of ego, *they want* to interact with the loyal fans that are the reason they have a job. In an arena that has the capacity for 18,000+ fans for a basketball game the Mercury draw roughly eight to nine thousand fans nightly, but they get as loud as any [Phoenix Suns](#) game.

There is an energy and feeling during a Mercury game that is hard to describe, but is as genuine and as warming as the college environment Coach Pennell is used to.

At this point in a season a coaching change is the universal sign for "waving the white flag." Not in this case. The Mercury brought in Coach Pennell to tap into the potential that has been unfulfilled so far this season. He has a philosophy that allows enough of a different voice to display change, but similar enough to adapt mid-season as the train is firmly on the tracks and going full speed.

"The thing I try to give them from an offensive standpoint is to play a little freer," stated Coach Pennell on his offensive strategy. "Every team has to run set plays, but you also know that the other team knows your set plays and you have to be able to vary off of that. I think that is where Candice (Dupree) is very good, her and Diana (Taurasi), are very good at playing off of each other."

In his debut the primary differences seen on the offensive end were that Taurasi was able to play off the ball more and the team utilized Dupree more to her full potential.

There are very few players in the WNBA with the offensive versatility that Dupree has at the forward position with the ability to shoot, finish, rebound, defend, and make plays without the ball in her hands. She was on full display under her new coach with the most field goal attempts in 22 games and the most points (20) and offensive rebounds (5) in the same game all year. She lit up the defensive end as well with three steals and two blocks.

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As much as Taurasi is the best player in the league and on the team, Dupree is a catalyst that is the key to the season for the Mercury to have a chance against the likes of the Lynx, Sparks, or even the Storm.

"One of the things we are trying to do is just up the effort on the defensive end and I thought it was very appropriate that we had to win it on the defensive end with a stop," Coach Pennell on the way the Mercury were able to win.

The Mercury did a better job of playing tougher and with more activity on the defensive end. They still have a ways to go to be even a good defensive team, there are a lot of holes still there, but there was positive displays.

This season the Mercury have been out-rebounded consistently, turned the ball over erratically, have been spotty defensively, and the only thing they have done consistent is play inconsistently. That changed in a one game snap-shot as they out-rebounded the Shock by 15, held them to 40.7% shooting, and still turned the ball over, but did a better job in the second half controlling the ball.

They overcame a dramatic free-throw difference and played another game without Brittney Griner and Penny Taylor.

All season the Mercury have weathered a storm with brief sunlight, but have not been able to find consistency. There are 12 games remaining this season with only two games against teams with a .500 record or better -- both on the road.

The team will be tested as the season continues with the Storm on their heels in the conference and a new coach acclimating to the WNBA as a league.

"Of course we are just 48 hours in, they may get tired of me next week, but right now we are in a real good place," Coach Pennell on the vibe.

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Things can change for the worse, there is proof of that over the course of two seasons here in Phoenix, but this could also be the energy burst required for the Mercury to finally get things going.