

Written by
Tuesday, 13 August 2013 10:00 -



The [Phoenix Suns](#) are going to struggle to score, create offense, and generally be efficient on that side of the ball in 2013-2014. That is acceptable as long as the new look "athletic" roster is up to the task on the defensive end. Are they?

Eleventh Topic: D-FENSE

1. Breaking the Ice: Who is the Phoenix Suns best overall defensive player? Explain.

Jim Coughenour: It better be the guy with suspect ankles they just took fifth in the draft. Dragic and Bledsoe should rack up steals, but are flawed as one on one defenders. Tucker plays tenaciously, but also gets burned because he doesn't give spacing on the perimeter. Gortat is a decent defender, but has never seemed to strike fear into the hearts of opposing teams. If Len can't be they type of imposing force in the middle that deters players cutting to the hole then I have serious doubts about whether that pick was squandered. On a team this bad, the center you just took fifth overall should be your best defensive player.

Jacob Padilla: There are really only two possible answers to this question. The best returning defender is obviously P.J Tucker. His hard-nosed, relentless, in-your-face style can make things difficult for opposing wings. He's not the quickest, and he doesn't have great length, but he's incredibly strong and gives maximum effort on every player. Eric Bledsoe is the best newcomer. He may be small, but he has great length and elite athleticism. He doesn't always know what he's doing off the ball and in the team setting, but if you ask him to lock an opponent;s best ball-handler down he's going to do it. He certainly has the physical tools and he plays with plenty of energy and effort; now all he needs to do is get the mental side of it down.

Dave King: I don't know that the Suns have a defensive specialist at this time who can make an All-Defensive Team this season. If Eric Bledsoe can extend his effectiveness over the course of 35 minutes per game, then maybe he's the one. P.J. Tucker plays with maximum effort and

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works his opponent hard, but he's not a shut-down defender. What I like most about the off season acquisitions is that they have a defensive mentality while being dynamic on offense. Goodwin, Bledsoe, Len and even Miles Plumlee all like to play on the defensive end.

Kris Habbas: As an individual defender, the answer is P.J. Tucker, but from a team perspective the answer is Eric Bledsoe. Tucker has the ability to make a go-to scorer work harder than normal for 48 minutes and wear on them throughout the game with his strength at the two and the three. On the other Bledsoe can cause havoc in the open court without a primary responsibility in the half court. Split the difference and P'eric Blucker is the best defender on the roster.

Sean Sullivan: I think P.J. is the best defensive player at the moment, though I think his overall defense may be a little over-hyped when it comes to the x's and o's. Still, he plays with tons of effort and energy, and he is absolutely relentless...so that definitely counts for something.

2. *Should (or can) this team rely on defense to win games next season as they are currently constructed? Explain.*

JP: Well, honestly I'm not sure there is any part of the game this Suns team can rely on to actually win. The Suns were bad defensively and probably even worse offensively last year, and while there has been a lot of change the core of the roster is still more or less intact and returning. A Bledsoe-Dragic (with a little Goodwin mixed in) backcourt has potential, as does a Gortat-Len center rotation. But other than that, Tucker is really the only other good defender on the team.

DK: Haha no. Just because a team wants to play quality defense doesn't mean they have to become the Detroit Pistons of the mid-2000s. I see the Suns trying to score like crazy with some of those scores being fast breaks off of steals. Any shutdown defensive possessions will be a bonus. As Mike D'Antoni always said, all you need to do is give up fewer points than you score. The big question is how much this team can actually score.

KH: Last season over the final 41 games of the season the team tried to slow down the pace of the game to contend on the defensive end, but still surrendered 105.9 points per game... Overall they should be an improved unit, but the middle of the defense between the PG and C

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positions might be collectively the worst in the league.

SS: Not at all...This team is built for speed and scoring. Trying to make them into a half-court, defense-minded team would be a disaster. I expect the Suns to return to their seven seconds or less roots...I doubt we see much defense at all.

JC: Depends on if we're talking about semantics and causality. The defense has to be there for the offense to move. The D is the gas for the motor. Hornacek wants to adopt (at least) an opportunistic defense that can create stops to facilitate transition. Can this happen? I think at times it will. Although the team will suffer through their share of savage floggings, I can also see the Suns rolling a couple teams over the duration of the season.

3. Overall last season the Suns were ranked in the bottom third of the league in most defensive categories and struggled... How can they improve?

DK: The NBA is about defending the pick-and-roll. But the Phoenix Suns most glaring problem last season was defending the three-point line, due to terrible defensive rotations. It was astonishing how often the opponent got a wide open three off a few passes. The Suns were second worst in the entire league over the course of the season after starting the season (under Gentry) as the worst by far. Let's start there.

KH: Stay in front of the ball-handler and defend the pick-and-roll better. Last year it was an adventure trying to defend the pick-and-roll which is about as common on the basketball court as chain smoking on Mad Men... Improvements in those two categories should equal an improved overall defense.

SS: I think it has to come from the players, and it has to be part of the culture. You can teach proper rotations all you want, but if the players aren't buying in, it won't work. The fact is, Phoenix has never really committed to building a defensive-minded culture here. That would take at least a few years to do with the acquisition of players and the change of mentality. I just don't think that either the front office nor the fanbase really wants to give up the high-flying style of play to make that transition.

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JC: Teach people roles within a system. Last season's incarnation was fairly rudderless. Even a good defensive player can get lost in a bad system. Mediocre defensive players can also shine when they are put in the right situation. Scheme. Scheme. Scheme. Individual work on fundamentals will need to complement this.

JP: I think the most important thing is to get a system in place and to get the players understanding their roles and buying into that systems. The Suns' defensive rotations ranged from awful to nonexistent last year. Defense is all about the team, especially on a roster with only a couple good individual defenders.

4. There are players that need to be masked on the court due to their defensive limitations; what system or scheme would work well for the new staff and the collective roster? Zone? Press? Man-to-man?

KH: It takes elite conditioning to play a full-court game on one end, so if the team is running an up-tempo offense it will be intense to expect in on the defensive end, but that might be their best weapon. With Dragic, Bledsoe, Goodwin, and Tucker able to spearhead a press that might be the teams best weapon next season. Sprinkle in some zone and a healthy amount of half-court man defense, as well as some schemes, and that should mask some of the inefficiencies on the defensive end.

SS: I agree with Jacob here. You can do different schemes in certain situations, but at the end of the day, it's all about man-to-man in the NBA.

JC: Unfortunately the Suns don't have a Marion-esque type of defender they can just throw at the opposing team's best player. Instead there will be players who need help. I'm really interested to see how the Bledsoe/Dragic tandem plays together... that might be a situation where it creates mismatches on both ends of the court. If Frye is healthy he's a one man walking matchup problem for opposing teams. The goal is to create more problems for other teams than for ourselves. And... can the "BerLen" wall control the paint.

JP: In the NBA, you have to be able to play man-to-man defense. That's where it all starts, and no amount of gimmicks will be able to really make a difference if the Suns can't even do that. That being said, the Suns do have some interesting pieces that could allow them to mix things

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up. The Suns want to play at a high tempo and get out on the break, and to do that they will need to get stops and, more ideally, force turnovers. Dragic, Bledsoe, Goodwin and Tucker are all guys that can get up in the opponents' faces and really pressure the ball, which could lead to those turnovers. Gortat is pretty good at rotating to provide help and protect the rim, and Alex Len has the length and mobility to do the same. The Suns have some pieces; it will be up to Jeff Hornacek to figure out how best to use them.

DK: The Suns best defense is one that is easy to understand and implement. Guys were lost last season under two different defensive philosophies, and rotations were terrible as a result. Gentry commented that on any given play half the guys would be playing one defensive set while the other half would play another. P.J. Tucker stands out in a positive way because he was relentless on man-to-man so we noticed it. But he wasn't a good team defensive player either. So the answer is: anything they can remember.

5. *Shadowing the question above, who (or whom) are the team's biggest defensive liabilities this season? Explain.*

SS: Kendall Marshall when it comes to guarding fast point guards. But since he will only be playing reserve minutes, I may have to go with Markieff here, who is expected to have a much bigger role. Markieff has all of the ability to be a good defender, but for whatever reason (lazy or mental lapses) he just doesn't do it.

JC: Power forward. When a team is banking on Channing Frye to come back and be the stalwart of a group at the four... that doesn't bode well. The Suns will be challenged to play against bigger stronger teams. Scola was an average defender at best, but his savvy allowed him some berth on that end. The players sharing time at that spot next season don't possess that savvy.

JP: Well, pretty much everyone I haven't yet mentioned (with the exception of a healthy Channing Frye) are defensive liabilities. Kendall Marshall, Shannon Brown, Gerald Green, Marcus Morris and Markieff Morris are all bad defenders (to varying degrees of badness). I forgot about Caron Butler, who isn't a liability but isn't a lock-down guy either.

DK: Basically everyone has to be hidden on defense. Until they don't. Channing Frye won't be a

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good defender, if he plays at all. The Morris brothers were always inconsistent on defense. Caron Butler is basically a statue at this point in his career. Gerald Green is Michael Beasley without the smoke. Kendall Marshall is physically limited. But even Gortat, Bledsoe, Goodwin, Len and Dragic are bad until they prove otherwise. [Welcome aboard, Mike Longbardi!](#)

KH: The collective power forward unit. Who can defend out of this group? Markieff Morris, Marcus Morris, Michael Beasley, and to a lesser extent Channing Frye are one dimensional players. If Channing is healthy he is their best overall big man and arguably the team's best player.

BONUS: *Is there a difference between getting more athletic players and being a more athletic team? Most people associate athleticism with good defense, can that be the case for the Suns?*

SS: I think there's something to that. It could be the case for the Suns as well, but I remain unconvinced that we will see it happen, at least not any time soon. Not saying they can't make improvements though, but I just don't think defense is the Suns' main focus.

JC: Athleticism makes the game fun to watch. Jumping, running, dunking. Most of the great individual defensive players are gifted athletes... fundamentals minus that athleticism makes you Jared Dudley... or P.J. Tucker. I don't think the Suns have a great individual defender on the team right now. For them to get back to the point where they can compete at a high level they will need one. A wing that can guard multiple positions is indispensable. The Suns are definitely more athletic than this time last year, but they haven't brought in a stopper and will need to address that over the next few years. Guys like Allen and Sef don't make the highlights, but are key cogs.

JP: I think terms applied to teams are often overrated. Things like "old" and "athletic" rarely describe the whole team (think San Antonio and Miami for examples). I do think there is a difference. For example, adding Gerald Green doesn't really make the Suns all that much more athletic if he doesn't even earn a spot in the rotation. As for athleticism equating to good defense, all too often that is not the case. Athleticism certainly helps, and can make the difference between good and great defenders (think P.J. Tucker vs. Andre Iguodala), but defense is all about effort and understanding. I don't think the Suns have enough players that fit that bill to have a great or even good overall team defense this year.

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DK: Yes, there is a big difference. It's the brain. And not the person's IQ, but their basketball intelligence. If a player doesn't get the concepts of team defense instinctually, then he's only going through the motions and gets lost in rotation. That's why it's important for Longabardi to design a defense that's simple to understand and execute without being exploited by the other team.

KH: Typically, I associate good defense with intelligence, not athleticism. Some of the better defenders in league history have been average athletes and some of the best athletes in league history have been average defenders. The increase in athleticism has to translate to better defensive output because the team will struggle to score consistently.