

What if the referee had given Paul Silas that timeout in the Phoenix Suns-Boston Celtics 1976 Finals?

Written by

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Those who know my writing on the [Phoenix Suns](#) over the years, know that I really don't like playing the "What if" game. I've fought hard against those who like to re-write history based on a single pivotal moment in time, as if what happens next can only be wonderful. What if Amare and Diaw hadn't been suspended? What if [J](#)

[oe Johnson](#)

, or

[Raja Bell](#)

, or Amare, or

[Kurt Thomas](#)

hadn't been injured at pivotal times?

Let's go back in time to the first pivotal "What if?" in Phoenix Suns franchise history.

What if that timeout was called in the 1976 Finals?

In what is often dubbed the Greatest Game Ever Played, the Celtics' Paul Silas tried to call a timeout with 3 seconds to go and the game tied 101-101. The Celtics didn't have a timeout. If the timeout had been called, a technical foul would have ensued and the Suns would have had the chance to take a lead with three seconds left.

" [I'd put my money on Paul Westphal making that free throw](#) ," [head coach John] MacLeod said.

[Guard Paul] Westphal said he saw [Paul] Silas call the timeout.

"And so did Richie Powers," Westphal said, laughing.

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Silas...said he tried.

"That's what everybody still talks about 25 years later," he said [in 2001]. "That's all right with me. I did. I tried to call one and Richie Powers didn't see me or didn't want to see me.

"He didn't acknowledge it. I know they feel if he had, it would have been a different ending. Bottom line is that he didn't and we got another ring."

The game eventually went three overtimes, with the Celtics winning and taking a 3-2 series lead. The series ended the next game, in Phoenix, at the hands of the Celtics.

What if the timeout had been called, resulting in a technical free throw for the Suns?

Well, the Suns might have taken a commanding 3-2 series lead in the 1976 Finals. The Suns might have won Game 6 at home to close out the series. And the Suns might have won their first [NBA Finals](#) in only their 8th year of existence.

As it was, the Suns lost that game and the series. And that team, who'd made a Finals run after only going 42-40 during the season, never sniffed the Finals again.

Yet that game, that Suns loss, still reigns as one of the greatest game ever played. And that game, so early in the Suns run in Phoenix, cemented their hold on the town. The Suns still don't have an NBA championship. But that game, and a remarkable playoff run, left an indelible imprint on the Valley.

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"There is no doubt that season, that year, that team, that series and that game specifically galvanized the community," said [former] Suns chairman Jerry Colangelo, then the general manager. "It brought a community together. People of different persuasions and different parts of country rallied around that team, and we were becoming a melting pot even then."

That game has since been introduced to even more fans as a staple of classic sports broadcasts.

"I never knew I'd be making history," said Ricky Sobers, a rookie guard on that team. "They've actually immortalized us. Nothing wrong with that at all. I still go out and continue to meet people that remember that game. It feels like half the people in the world have seen it."

Two of the luminaries on that team you can see in the youtube clip above are still with the Phoenix Suns organization to this day. Center Alvan Adams and forward Dick Van Arsdale just walked the runway last week at the Suns Fashion Show wearing their original Suns jerseys from that era, and still work for the team all these decades later.

What if the Suns had won Game 5?

There is no guarantee the Suns would have won either of the next two games. Red Auerbach's [Boston Celtics](#) were already the league's most storied franchise and a recent Finals winner. Phoenix was an upstart that needed luck to win any of those games.

As it was, Boston came into Phoenix with a 3-2 lead won the game cleanly. The Suns, with their backs against the wall, couldn't muster a series-tying win at home. Who says they could have closed out an NBA Finals at home?

Nay, if the Suns had won Game 5 there less than good statistical chance that they would have won Game 6 or Game 7 (back in Boston). There were the heavy underdog with no playoffs or Finals experience.

If the Suns had won Game 5 102-101 on a Westphal free throw, the game would not be

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recognized as the Greatest Game Ever played. The Suns earlier wins in the series are never mentioned. It's because the Celtics somehow won Game 5 that it's been immortalized.

What if the Suns had gone on to win the 1976 NBA Finals?

If the Suns had found a way to win Game 6 or 7 after closing out Game 5 on a Westphal free throw, it's quite possible the entire Phoenix Suns franchise trajectory would have been altered forever.

The Suns might now be one of the league's elite, with Finals wins to top off their NBA 4th best winning percentage. If the Suns had closed out the NBA Finals in 1976, they might have had the moxie to win in 1993 too. The sky could have been limit.

Oh, the riches! Oh, the wonder!

But what if our "what if's" were actually answered?

A championship early in a team's existence. Hmm... Sounds like Colangelo's Diamondbacks of 2001. That [World Series](#) win defined the D'backs franchise in many ways. Not the least of which is that what's come since has been a huge disappointment.

Partly, it's because the "What If's" have already been answered.

What if Brenly had put in Randy Johnson to close out Game 7 of that Finals after Schilling got them to the 7th?

What if little Luis Gonzales had gotten a hit, even a blooper, off the mighty Yankee closer Mariano Rivera?

D'backs fans got those "what if" prayers answered before they could even get the questions out of their mouths. With those "what if's" answered, the D'backs would go on to a great future right?

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Wrong. That World Series win for the DBacks was done in unsustainable fashion . The Dbacks were incredibly lucky in many ways, and their veterans were at the apex of their careers all at the same time. Everything went downhill from there.

But has it? In the 12 seasons since 2001, the DBacks have reached the NLCS twice. Both times, they boasted a bevy of young, upstart talent that appeared to be on the rise.

Yet, the stands at the BOB have never since been as full as they were in the early DBacks years leading up to the Series. Fans love an underdog. They love a lovable loser. Just check out the Cubs fans in Chicago for instance. Or those Suns fans in Phoenix.

Once the DBacks won a World Series early in their existence, the fans no longer see an underdog franchise. Even today, while fans like the gritty DBacks who are fighting an uphill battle for the playoffs once again, there's no mystique. No wonder. No don't hear DBacks fans say "we never get a break" or "if we could just win that ring, just once".

The Suns were sold out for years while reaching no further than the Western Conference Finals. Every game a sellout, from opening day forward.

The Cardinals were sold out for years after opening UoP stadium in Glendale while Warner led the Cards to a [Super Bowl](#) loss and one other early playoff exit. Every game a sellout, from opening day forward.

The DBacks have fielded quality teams in many of the seasons since that World Series, twice reaching the National League Championship series. Yet sellouts, which came so easy in 2000 and 2001, have been few and far between.

Been there. Done that. Mystique over.

Sometimes you get what you ask for

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Sometimes, you get what you want. And, you realize it wasn't exactly what you wanted at all.

What if the Suns had won the Finals in 1976? Who knows. What we do know is that nearly 40 years later, fans still love the Suns and would sell out the arena if the team were on the rise again. No need for a championship to bring back the fans, just the smell of potential is good enough.

I prefer underdogs. I prefer anticipating things going right for once. I prefer getting excited over possibilities to come, rather than lamenting what could have been.

I like the idea of a winner, and I like knowing it can always get better. I'm not saying I'm glad the Suns lost that 1976 NBA Finals. But I am glad there's still a chance to see the Suns win their first championship. Lame, I know. But it's who I am.

Your turn

Let's spend this hot, lazy August day discussing "what ifs" about our beloved Phoenix Suns.

Add a comment. Make a fanpost. Let's talk.

What if Paxson had missed that 3-pointer in Game 6 of the 1993 Finals?

What if [Antonio McDyess](#) had re-signed with the Suns after the 1999 lockout?

What if Joe Johnson had stayed healthy through the 2005 playoffs?

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What if [Amare Stoudemire](#) , or Kurt Thomas, or even Raja Bell, had been healthy all the way through 2006?