

Written by
Thursday, 12 September 2013 16:07 -



This summer, the [Phoenix Suns](#) did not sign any free agents. Not one. For the first time in, like, forever, an NBA team refused to take the bait of filling a hole with an overpriced, veteran NBA free agent.

Free agency has been the lifeblood of NBA since its inception in the late 80s, especially the Phoenix Suns. In fact, it was the Phoenix Suns who signed the NBA's first ever free agent in the summer of 1988. Tom Chambers, 29 at the time, signed a long-term contract on July 1 to help shape a Suns renaissance that lasted nearly a decade.

But this summer, despite owning the worst roster - top to bottom - in the Western Conference, the Phoenix Suns refused to stem the tide by signing a free agent in their prime who could potentially lead the Suns to the playoffs.

Instead, the Suns sat out the spending frenzy and traded veterans for youth and draft picks. They now will approach training camp with [15 players on guaranteed contracts totaling about \\$52 million dollars](#), 10 of whom are on rookie contracts.

I know what you did last summer

The Suns entered the summer with about \$7 million in cap space, two first-round picks and nine guaranteed contracts for next season. **Of the 9 players already under contract, only three were on cap-friendly rookie deals.**

The Suns only free agents were minor players -

[Wesley Johnson](#)

, Shannon Brown,

[Hamed Haddadi](#)

, Jermaine O'Neal and Diante Garrett. Everyone else was a veteran on free-agent/market-rate deals.

Phoenix Suns Free Agency: Keeping Bledsoe, Gortat would take Suns out of 2014 Free Agent market

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On the surface, there wasn't much to work with. Their cap space was barely larger than a midlevel deal - the worst contract in basketball, but one dotted all over the Suns veteran roster.

Enter new GM Ryan McDonough

"Walking in there, the main thing I wanted to do is upgrade the talent," said [McDonough to the Boston Globe recently](#)

. "And do it in a fashion that was sustainable for the long term. I didn't want to try to take any shortcuts or try any quick fixes."

McDonough leaves his first summer having brought in nine new players, exporting seven. In the end, 10 of 15 roster spots for 2013-14 are occupied up by cap-friendly rookie deals with the promise of three more coming next summer.

All that maneuvering leaves the Suns in the same spot they started - with just under \$7 million in cap space - but with a much younger roster.

Next summer is different

On the surface, the Suns are set up quite nicely for the 2014 off season. The Suns will enter next summer with

- as many as three first-round picks in reportedly the best draft since 2003, and
- up to \$24 million in cap space for the [best free agent market in years as well](#) .

Next off season, the Suns have committed guaranteed money to only three veterans ([Goran Dragic](#) ,
[Channing Frye](#) ,

[Gerald Green](#))

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), totaling \$17.8 million. Every other contract is a rookie-slotted contract.

[Alex Len](#)

and

[Archie Goodwin](#)

are guaranteed \$4.8 million total, while 9 other players are on either team options (4), qualifying offers (4) or non-guaranteed money (1).

Assuming the Suns keep the four kids on their cap-friendly team options - [Marcus Morris](#) , [Mar kieff Morris](#)

,
[Kendall Marshall](#)

and

[Miles Plumlee](#)

- around another year (I know, a big leap) and draft three more first-rounders next summer, **they project to have about \$22-24 million in cap room**

But some big names are free agents this time. LeBron James, Chris Bosh and Carmelo Anthony could all be unrestricted. DeMarcus Cousins, Derrick Favors and Greg Monroe could all be restricted. Every one would get a max deal in this NBA.

From the Suns perspective, [Marcin Gortat](#) , [Eric Bledsoe](#) (restricted), Vyacheslav Kravtsov (restricted), [Shannon Brown](#) , [Malco Im Lee](#)

and

[P.J. Tucker](#)

all become free agents. Gortat, Brown, Lee and Tucker will be unrestricted, meaning the Suns don't have the right to keep them just by matching someone else's offer.

How to spend \$22-24 million?

One option is to re-sign Eric Bledsoe and Marcin Gortat to market-rate free agent deals.

Bledsoe will be a restricted free agent, meaning the Suns can simply let the market dictate his price and match whatever offer he gets. According to Amin Elhassan, formerly as Asst Director of Basketball Ops for the Suns, Bledsoe is worth roughly \$8 million a year right now. If he plays very well next season, that number could rise to as much as \$13 million per year.

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Gortat will be a 30-year old veteran center who is still in his prime as a player, and likely still better than Alex Len, Miles Plumlee and Kravtsov put together. If the Suns want to make the playoffs in 2014-15, they will need a veteran center who is healthy and productive enough to play 82 games at 30+ minutes per game. Per Elhassan, Gortat should command about \$8.3 million per year as an unrestricted free agent.

Amin Elhassan ranks [Gortat and Bledsoe as the 17th and 19th best free agents available](#) next summer. The players ahead of Gortat are largely restricted free agents from the 2010 draft (meaning, won't be available just for money) or over-the-hill, overpaid stars. Oh, and LeBron James, [Chris Bosh](#) and [Carmelo Anthony](#) too.

Elhassan, on Gortat at 17: Stuck in Dwight Howard's shadow to start his career in Orlando, Gortat was a player we targeted in 2010 when I was a member of the Suns' front office. We knew he was a tremendous rebounder, something we desperately needed at the time, and felt he was underused on the offensive end. Since coming to the Suns, Gortat has continued to clean the glass and shown that he's a good finisher with great timing in pick-and-roll situations with either hand. Additionally, he has exhibited better-than-expected touch from about 15 feet. On the flip side, he's not a creative scorer in the post and lacks the ability to carve out space or improve post position. He's also an average defensive player.

Gortat has, at times, an overinflated sense of who he is as a player, but he's still a very solid option as a starting center, especially if paired with an elite power forward. Plus, he's probably been one of the most appropriately salaried players in the league. A three-year, \$25 million deal (AAV: \$8.3 million) would continue to give him raises over his past salary while maintaining affordability.

Elhassan, on Bledsoe at 19: Bledsoe can look at his time in Los Angeles two ways -- either he was held back by lack of playing time behind [Chris Paul](#) or he was saved from overexposure. Either way, we'll find out whether he is indeed the star talent many have speculated he is (including [LeBron James](#), who is represented by the same agent) this season, as Bledsoe will get a ton of minutes playing for the rebuilding Suns. He's an elite athlete at the point guard position, and an

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explosive scorer out of pick-and-rolls, but he still needs to show the ability to run a team offense. Defensively, he has all the tools to be a terrific on-ball defender but needs to bring more consistency, particularly in weakside rotations.

Phoenix has until Oct. 31 to extend Bledsoe's contract, and it's actually in both parties' best interests to do just that: The catch is they'll each have different valuations. Based on comparable point guard deals signed this offseason (Brandon Jennings' three years, \$24 million and Jeff Teague's four years, \$32 million), an appropriate valuation would be four years, \$32 million (AAV: \$8 million).

Elhassan projects those two to make \$16.3 million between them. If Bledsoe plays well, his number will rise. Signing those two guys alone might eat up most of the Suns money, leaving only the dreaded midlevel equivalent for a new player.

Of course, I don't expect this exact scenario to happen. The Suns will make more trades between now and then, shifting the landscape even more.

Yet, it's interesting to note that just KEEPING THE TEAM TOGETHER would take almost the entire salary cap to do.

For his part, McDonough has more tricks up his sleeve than simply re-signing the guys he already has.

"One of the exciting parts about the job," he said to the Globe. "With the draft-pick situation, with the salary-cap situation and the market, being an attractive destination, I can see a pretty clear path to get the team to the level that fans are used to in a couple of years, without having to try to rebuild forever."

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- [Phoenix Suns Podcast Episode 37: Clipper Steve Previews The Clippers As Well As Some Eric Bledsoe, Jared Dudley & Offense Winning Championships](#)

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- [DragonBlade: Phoenix Suns new Dragic/Bledsoe back court tough enough to defend bigger foes](#)
- [BSOTS Roundtable: Are the Phoenix Suns really that unwatchable? Really?](#)
- [Phoenix Suns Marcin Gortat kicks off holiday with a bang while Dragic and Kravtsov move on](#)