

Phoenix Suns need steals by Eric Bledsoe and Goran Dragic for quick offense

Written by

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New head coach Jeff Hornacek has been saying since the day he was hired that he wants the [Phoenix Suns](#) to play at a fast tempo. While the Suns finished last season ranked 11th in pace among 30 teams, Hornacek wants to run even faster than that. He famously told Bright Side's own Jim Coughenour that he wants the Suns to exceed 103 points per game this season.

To do so, the Suns will need to get stops on defense. Without an intimidating post presence to alter shots and grab rebounds for outlet passes on regular basis, the Suns will have to rely on their perimeter players to generate steals in the back court.

"We have some guys on this team - Eric [Bledsoe], Goran [Dragic], Shannon [Brown] - who can play those passing lanes," he said. "Obviously we can't let our guys fall asleep, but we want to still have active hands. That's going to allow us to get some easy buckets."

New point guard [Eric Bledsoe](#) fits that mold perfectly. Bledsoe was [third in the league in steal percentage at 3.7%](#) behind only [Ricky Rubio](#) and Chris Paul. While any single statistic is flawed, on an apples-to-apples basis it's clear that Eric Bledsoe knows how to take the ball from the opponent.

"[Former [Utah Jazz](#) teammate John] Stockton got a lot of steals, but Eric gets them in a different way: with strength," said coach Hornacek of Bledsoe. "He takes the ball out of guys hands. He's very quick so when they try to run a handoff around him he's always got his hand on the ball. Those are steals that really put pressure on a team."

While Bledsoe is great at getting steals with his bulldog on-ball defense, he's also quite clever off the ball as well. Bledsoe is great at baiting the opponent, just like an elite cornerback in football. On the wing, while keeping his eyes on the ballhandler, he can hang off his man just

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enough to make the ballhandler think his man is open enough to entice the pass, only to step in, slap it away and start a fast break.

His new running mate, [Goran Dragic](#), led the Suns in steals rate last season, followed closely by the Morris brothers and Shannon Brown. Dragic was 28th in the league at 2.5% steals rate last season, despite the team playing passive defense to defend more against dribble penetration than pressuring ball handlers.

With Dragic and Bledsoe leading the charge, the Suns might be close to the league lead in steals this season. They already have 23 steals in 2 preseason games (11.5 per game) after [grabbing 8 steals per game last season](#) (15th in the league overall).

"It could be like shooting, like assists," Hornacek said. "Things get contagious. Maybe steals-wise, between him and Goran, that'll do it."

But coach Hornacek warns against too much thief mentality.

"But we have to be a little careful," he warned. "We want them to be aggressive but not get out of position going for the steals. They (Maccabi) still scored 89 point on us."

Whether the Suns take possession by taking it out of bounds, rebounding or stealing, Hornacek wants them to run, run, run.

"The nearest guy to the basket, go ahead and take it out (after makes)," he said. "It's funny when you have two guys who can push the ball, the other guys start running. If you don't they're going to be back on the defensive side all the time. The fast break, it could be P.J. [Tucker], it could be Marcus [Morris], it could be Shannon. If they can get out on one or two dribbles, take it up the middle, make the defense react, then the next guy can go. We feel we have a lot of guys who can handle it and we allow it."

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Figuring out which guy will bring the ball up the court will be a challenge all season. Especially, knowing which of Dragic or Bledsoe should get the outlet. Both are point guards, both want to bring the ball up the court and set up the offense. And both will have a natural instinct to put their hands up to ask for it on a rebound or inbound.

"Whoever is closest to the ball, he's gonna get the ball," Dragic said. "The other one has to run. We were just talking in the locker room before the game, Marcin was asking if the point guard wants the ball, who should I pass to? The closest one. That's the deal."

"I think they will figure out what works well," Hornacek said. "I saw a couple times Eric got the outlet pass and Goran took off and got the layup. Good players do that. Good basketball players know how to play with other guys, in terms of what works best. One time it might be Goran, one time it might be Eric."

However it works out, we can only hope the Suns play fast all through the season. In one quarter of basketball - in either of the two preseason games so far - there's already been more fast breaks and dunks than I can remember in any game last season.

Last season's crew was a below-the-rim group - Scola, Gortat, Morris, Dudley, Johnson, etc. - while this group has a lot more athletes who want to run and dunk. A fast pace can only help that cause.

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