

Tinkering Around Part One: Are the Morris Twins the answer at forward for the Phoenix Suns?

Written by

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This year the [Phoenix Suns](#) have a lot of options in terms of roster flexibility and there has been a phrase that new head coach Jeff Hornacek has been using this summer. He has the luxury, or burden depending on the individual outlook, of carving out this team in his image with little to no hand-cuffs, even as a first year head coach.

The image he has been painting the verbal picture for the past few months is that of a team that will run, score off of energy, and plays the right way overall on both ends of the floor. All things that about 29 other teams want to do.

In order to get there Coach Hornacek is going to, in his words, "tinker around."

IT WOULD BE NICE IF WE WENT OUT THERE, HAD A LINE-UP THAT WORKS EVERY NIGHT, A BENCH THAT WORKS EVERY NIGHT, AND WE DON'T HAVE TO MAKE CHANGES. -Coach Hornacek on the rotation

Last year the team acquired [Marcus Morris](#), brother of 2011 No. 13 Overall Pick [Markieff Morris](#), in an effort to add more young talent. The potential ripple effects of adding Marcus to the fold was that he would ignite his brother and the Suns would have the opportunity to capture lightning in a bottle. When the two played together in college they were one of if not the best duo in the game playing off one another to dominate games.

It is hard enough to get two brothers to share an Xbox remote playing a game let alone get them to share the spotlight of a basketball career. These two are different. They want to play with each other as they have their entire careers to date and Coach Hornacek and the Suns are

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going to give them that chance again.

The team has questions all over the roster, but the three and the four, the forwards, seem to be the most in the air based on comments by the coaches and the pre-season to date.

So far Markieff, Marcus, [P.J. Tucker](#) (last years starting three), [Miles Plumlee](#) , and [Gerald Green](#) have all started at least one game at one of the two forward positions. There is uncertainty at the forward position as to who starts, who plays, and what the roles will be for each team going into the season. The logical long-term option would be to give the Morrii a chance as the youngest combination, former lottery picks, and as the duo with the most potential as well as experience playing with each other.

During their time at Kansas the duo went 68-6 overall and 4-2 in the [NCAA Tournament](#) as starters. They were dynamic for their positions and caused mismatches nightly.

What made the Morrii unique and special was that they did things that other players at their position could not do. Marcus, a combo forward, was capable of handling the ball a little, score in the paint, and rebound the ball from either the three or the four position. He was a classic tweener coming out of college, not big or strong enough to play in the paint for 30 minutes a night, but also not quick or skilled enough to play on the perimeter for those same minutes nightly. That makes for a versatile player, but it also limits the gameplan when he is on the court. In the end he is a small-ball four that will play some at the three in the NBA as seen in Houston and now in Phoenix.

Markieff was the counter-balance. He was another tweener, but from the four and the five which is easier to fit into a gameplan. In his final season with Kansas Markieff was the Big 12's best rebounder by total rebounds (316), per game (8.3), and percentage (19.7) proving to be the leagues best rebounding and defensive big man prospect.

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In college they balanced each other out, against non-comparable competition, but nonetheless they each carved out roles.

I WOULD GUESS WITH OUR GROUP, MAYBE ALL YEAR LONG, WE WILL TINKER WITH THINGS. -Coach Hornacek on seasonal changes

Marcus was the scorer and Markieff was the rebounder defender that catapulted the duo into the 2011 [NBA Draft](#) Lottery. Over time Markieff was seen as the better long-term prospect because of his rebounding and defensive potential. He had the size to play the four and lampoon the five at times. That was the idea when he was drafted one spot ahead of his more offensively skilled brother to the Suns and onto a team that was attempting to fill the void of the loss of [Amare Stoudemire](#) .

The one common element that made the Morrii a productive duo at Kansas was the threat of the three-point shot. It was something in their back pocket as a pace change, like a change-up in baseball, and made them hard to guard.

In college each brother shot the ball exceptionally well from the field. Marcus (55.5%) and Markieff (55.3%) were efficient from the field and both played inside the three-point line. Back then Markieff was a true post player and popped out for a three (40.4% from time to time (5.5:1 two-to-three point shot ratio) to keep the defense off balance. His threes were rationed and more meaningful. Since coming to the NBA he has shot 40.4% from the field, same as his three-point percentage in college with a 3.2:1 two-to-three point shot ratio.

The three-point shot has become more of their identifier versus the change-up that kept the defense on their toes.

Shooting is an important element for an NBA team for spacing and overall court balance. Through two seasons in the NBA the Morrii have shot their share of threes (508 combined), but

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have not produced (34.6% collectively) from behind the arc. Since they were drafted Markieff has logged more minutes and starts shooting 34.1% from three (40.4% from the field) providing little spacing as a "stretch-four."

From the field Marcus (41.0%) and Markieff (40.4%) have become less efficient players overall as well. They provide shooting, but so far not in a positive way.

With Coach Hornacek "tinkering around" with things one element he mentioned was playing the Morrii together. They got very little time together in this system in Training Camp and in the pre-season to date. Last year however they logged 132 minutes together as a three-four duo with a center on the floor with them according to [82games.com data](http://82games.com) . Those line-ups had an effective plus/minus of -36 and an overall win record of 5-11 based on the data collected.

There were very effective line-ups last year, but in the time the brothers shared on the court last season they were not as dynamic as they were back in Lawrence.

Shooting aside they just looked uncomfortable on an NBA floor together. To date Markieff has been the more productive NBA player, but throughout their careers playing together Marcus has always been the better half. It was that way in high school and in college.

Coach Hornacek has a full season to see if the Morrii Experiment can work at this level.

Based on the projected starters for every other NBA team and the individual career shooting numbers the Morrii would be the least efficient starting forward duo in the league in terms of field goal percentage. With Marcus at the three and Markieff at the four the Suns would be one of five teams in the entire league with a three shooting under 45% and a four shooting under 50% for their careers.

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A basic baseline for shooting at the three is about 45% for an average-to-good shooter and 50% at the four. In fact, if you factor out [Wesley Johnson](#), the [Lakers](#) projected starting three, Marcus would have the lowest career field goal percentage entering the season for a starting three and Markieff is the lowest shooting four entering the season. As a rookie

[Cody Zeller](#)

is not factored, but in college he did shoot 59% from the field.

The team can go in numerous directions with the starting three and four, including the Morrii, but there are other combinations that are equal or better in terms of shooting.

A P.J. Tucker (47.4%) and Markieff would be an improvement in overall field goal percentage, but gives them little spacing as Tucker is inconsistent as a shooter from three-point range, especially from the weak-side corner. Re-introducing Channing Frye (44.5%) to the starting line-up with Marcus would be better and with Tucker would be statistically the best combination. The forward positions are up in the air with no player taking the reigns and standing out in the pre-season as a locked in starter.

There is a lot of tinkering that can be done here still. Long-term the Morrii are the youngest players with the most potential as Tucker (28) and Frye (30) are on the back nine of their careers.

If the Morris brothers can learn to share court time as productive and cohesively as their matching tattoos then all this tinkering will be well worth the time.

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