

On Nerlens Noel, tanking and the Phoenix Suns

Written by

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Today, the Sixers head coach [Brett Brown](#) said that rookie center [Nerlens Noel](#), the #6 pick in this year's draft for whom the Sixers traded an All-Star to get, would likely not play at all for the Philly boys this season.

That Noel would miss the season is not real news, as no less than five teams passed on Noel and the sixth, New Orleans, only drafted him in order to trade his rights (and their somewhat-protected 2014 #1 pick) for All-Star Jrue Holiday. Noel was considered the consensus #1 overall pick based entirely on talent, so the fact that he was passed up by five teams suggests as much.

Tanking

No team has been more brazen with their plan to tank this season than the Sixers. Their coach was hired only two weeks short of a record "late hire", second only to the naming of [Alvin Gentry](#) to coach the [Clippers](#) late in 2000. Gentry accepted the Clippers job just weeks after taking an assistant job with San Antonio.

Brett Brown, formerly an assistant with San Antonio, took the job and immediately began setting low expectations for the Sixers this season.

Now, they are not even going to try to play their top draft pick this season, planning instead to enter next season with one second-year lottery pick ([Michael Carter-Williams](#)), and three high-picked rookies - Noel, plus their own and New Orleans' pick in 2014.

Sounds to me like two straight years of 60+ losses if not five or more.

There's tanking right, and tanking wrong

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To me, the Sixers are doing it wrong. Well, they will certainly lose a lot of games, but so did Charlotte (7 wins in 66 games) after the lockout and New Jersey (12 wins in 2010) before then. Charlotte never did get the #1 pick for their troubles, and neither did New Jersey. In fact, only 4 teams with the worst record have ever won the #1 overall pick since the lottery began.

The team with the worst record has a better chance at a pick between 4 and 6 (35.8%) than the #1 overall (25%). Charlotte got the #2 pick for being worst in 2011-12, and the #4 pick for being second-worst in 2012-13. Minnesota got only #2 overall for finishing a league-worst 17-65 in 2011. The New Jersey [Nets](#) only got the third pick in 2010 after their stellar 12-70 season.

Losing pays, but losing the most - and in spectacular fashion - almost always loses. Might as well finish with the second or third worst record and just watch the balls bounce the way they bounce.

Enter the [Phoenix Suns](#)

We all know the Suns will struggle this season. The first inkling was hiring a rookie GM and a rookie coach (actually, the very first inkling was having the least young talent in the league). The second was drafting two of the youngest, highest potential prospects in the draft when they were available. The third was trading good (though aging) veterans for youth this summer, most of whom not even guaranteed to make the rotation on one of the worst teams in the league.

The latest inkling is the realization that no GM would go out of his way to pair two combo guards in the starting lineup for the future. You do it for today, for here and now during the evaluation phase. But you don't conceive of this plan from scratch. Still, the pairing may work out the way KJ and Hornacek did. Likelier though, is a realization at some point they are better apart from each other.

The Suns will be bad. Real bad. But while Philly sits one of their rookies all season, the Suns will play theirs. The Suns are focusing on character and mission, if not immediate talent. The Sixers are just playing out the string. They all know it, and they are getting blasted in record fashion even in the preseason.

The Phoenix Suns are taking the path of Orlando and Cleveland, who are building a foundation and competitive drive while losing. Which path is Philly taking? Charlotte's?

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