

Phoenix Suns success at defending rim, hounding shooters not seen in Valley in a long time

Written by

Sunday, 10 November 2013 10:06 -



Fans of the desert team are used to viewing defense as that intermission between offensive plays, but that should change this year as the Suns are playing an active, energetic defense that bring the crowd to it's feet all by itself.

The [Phoenix Suns](#) , picked by many as the worst team in the West, have come out of the gates sporting the league's 5th best defense after six games.

Sure, the sample size is small. But in the desert you learn to appreciate that glimmering pond of fresh water on the horizon whether it's really an oasis or not.

Suns fans are not used to seeing defense played so effectively. Rather, we are used to treating that half of the game as a necessary evil to get to the other end.

This year, though, the defensive end is a joy to watch.

"We want to run," point guard [Goran Dragic](#) says, "but we have to get the stops, get the rebounds first."

Well, duh. We've heard Suns teams beating that drum for about 45 years now but they have rarely turned that dream into a consistent reality.

Yet this season, the Suns' defense has helped the team to a 4-2 start, first in the Pacific division, on the back of the league's 5th-rated defense.

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Again, take this with a grain of salt because of the small sample size. But the sample size is small for all 30 NBA teams and the Suns had more turnover - 10 players, an entire coaching staff - than most, so the 'continuity' argument goes out the window.

The eye test

What I see on the court is aggressive defense on the ball handler, along with consistent rotations and even some really good second-level rotations (rotating to the rotating player's man).

For prior Suns teams, the latter rotation was always their achilles' heel, often leaving a weak-side three-point shooter or cutter. This year, you don't see a lot of open weak-side players free to create their own open shot. You see rotations that bottle up the other teams to the point that you wonder why they aren't passing enough, or executing well.

This will, of course, get tougher over the course of the season as teams' offensive efficiency improves like it always does. But the Suns offense (14th overall) will improve as well, and all you have to do is be a little better than the other guys each night.

"We have to make sure we get onto them and close out under control so they're not just driving by us and making extra passes," Hornacek said before the Denver game on Friday.

The stats

On a high level, the [Suns defensive marks are pretty good](#) .

- Opponent field goal % is 7th overall: 42.8%
- Opponents three-point % is 10th overall: 33.3%
- Rebounding is 12th overall: 44.6 per game
- Steals are 8th overall: 7.3 per game
- Defensive Efficiency (points per possession) is 5th overall: 99.1 points per 100 possessions

Compare those numbers to last season and you almost have to laugh. Remember the times

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when the Suns were disgustingly giving up 42% on threes? Or 27th or worse year over year in rebounding?

Defending the rim

While we all can see the aggressive nature of the perimeter defenders, we must also appreciate the defense being played in the paint. Opponents are not scoring will at the basket, and that can be attributed to paint defenders [Miles Plumlee](#) , [Channing Frye](#) and [Markieff Morris](#) .

Frye (40.5%), Plumlee (40.6%) and Morris (43.8%) are [all among the Top 20 players in the league at defending the rim](#) , among players getting at least 20 minutes per game and defending at least four shots at the rim. I used the filters to create an apples-to-apples comparison among regular NBA rotation players.

"We have [Plumlee] out there in position to take one or two steps and get a block or alter the shot," Hornacek said. "You put the guys in the right spots, but if they don't have the instincts they will be slow to close out. He does a great job of reading when to block the shot and when to not."

It all starts with having a shot-blocker in the middle.

"We're all about teamwork here. [Plumlee] feels if he goes for a block, that someone's going to get his man and block his guy out so he's comfortable with going."

Grabbing contested rebounds

Once the shot is up and the ball caroms off the rim, someone has to rebound it. The Suns are among the best in the league at grabbing that contested rebound (securing the rebound with a defender within 3.5 feet).

"They can't fall asleep," Hornacek said of team defense. "They know if Miles goes for the block, they have to crack down. There's going to be a miss and a loose ball somewhere, and they're anticipating that well."

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In fact, [P.J. Tucker](#) is [6th in the league at contested rebound rate](#) (an opponent within 3.5 feet of him) among those playing at least 25 minutes with at least 4 games played, grabbing 48.5% of them. Miles Plumlee is 12th (45.5%) and Markieff Morris is 53rd (30.6%).

Markieff's numbers aren't great, but they are better than such luminaries as [Serge Ibaka](#) , [David West](#)

,
[Blake Griffin](#)

and

[Marc Gasol](#)

at this point.

Summary

These are just two of the new defensive numbers being made available this season by the NBA thanks to the league-wide use of the SportVu cameras. SportVu records every play from six different angles, allowing teams to aggregate the results and, in part, better define the "how" behind a quality defense that was never able to be tracked before.

As you can see, the Suns are doing the little things well that result in quality defense, which in turn results in gritty wins and helps the team maintain their poise under pressure.

Whether that continues or not remains to be seen, yet the principles instilled by defensive coordinator Mike Longabardi and the rest of the coaching staff are those that are usually sustainable over the long haul.