

Going Gorilla: The weekly rant - Close contests and last week's late game "zeroics"

Written by

Sunday, 17 November 2013 17:35 -



The Phoenix Suns had been cheating death through the first two weeks of the NBA season, but last week they were scythed. Speaking of dead things, I exhume some information from the beginning of last season... and find some disturbing interesting parallels.

It's really hard to use a simple set of criteria to define what a close game is. For the sake of this I will use within 5 points with less than five minutes to go (sort of). But that isn't always a close game... A team could score to cut it to five with 4:30 to go only to see their opponent nail a three on the ensuing possession and run off 10 straight. Not so close. What if a team is down by 10 plus the entire fourth quarter and then hits a pair of meaningless threes in the last few seconds of the game to lose by five?

A final score within five points can also be prevaricative, as a game could have been tied with two minutes to go before one team pulled away.

Maybe a single score game (three points) in the final three minutes is better? What are your thoughts?

But here's the inadequately insufficient touchstone of the five/five as it relates to the 2012-13 Phoenix Suns.

0-1: Loss vs. Golden St. 87-85 (Suns up by one at 1:43)

1-1: Win vs. Detroit 92-89 (Suns up by five at :52, three at :21 and two at :04)

2-1: Win vs. Charlotte 117-110 (Suns up by four at 3:31 and :31)

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3-1: Win vs. Cleveland 107-105 (Suns trailed by one at 1:47)

3-2: Loss vs. Utah 94-81 (Suns trailed by five at 4:46)

4-2: Win vs. Denver 110-100 (Suns up by two at 3:00)

4-3: Loss vs. Chicago 112-106 OT (Suns never led in OT)

The Suns other two losses were blowout affairs emceed by Miami (124-99) and Orlando (115-94). Still, the Suns had been playing, and winning, a lot of close games early in the season. After nine games they sat at 4-5.

At that nine game point a lot of us still felt that the window for the Suns was between 30-40 wins, rife with a pick in the 10-12 range. There was even still a contingent (Jim sheepishly raises hand) claiming that Michael Beasley, and the eventual contretemps this experiment devolved into, should be shown some clemency as it would take some time for him to adjust to his new surroundings. That's still a situation where I defend my logic, but feel like a blithering buffoon for not recognizing an obvious exception. Several early impressions were shattered.

Using just five points or less, the Suns would be just 2-1. It would even cut out the six point overtime loss... because obviously that wasn't close. Using three/three eliminates the Charlotte and Utah games, making the Suns 3-2.

Regardless of the exact criterion, though, these results show that the Suns were performing well in close games.

Fast forward to this year.

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1-0: Win vs. Portland 104-91 (Suns up by five at 3:15)

2-0: Win vs. Utah 87-84 (Suns trailed by three at 4:20, Bledsoe game winner at :00.4)

2-1: Loss vs. OKC 103-96 (Suns trailed by one at 4:47, one at :30)

3-1: Win vs. NO 104-98 (Suns up by four at 4:18 and :04)

3-2: Loss vs. SA 99-96 (Suns up by one at :40)

4-2: Win vs. Denver 114-103 (Suns up by four at 1:57)

5-2: Win vs. NO 101-94 (Suns by five at 2:39)

5-3: Loss vs. Portland 90-89 (Suns up by four at 2:30, Lillard game winner at :04)

5-4: Loss vs. Brooklyn 100-98 OT (tied at :56 in OT, Johnson game winner as time expired)

Using the five/five metric all nine of these games would be considered close, and for the most part they have been, but two of the games never got within that five point mark and another never got within four.

Using the games decided by five points stat the Suns would be 1-3. That seems like a fairly preposterous gauge of their performance. But using the three/three they would be even worse (1-4)...

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What gives? Well, the other four wins were games where the other team never even got within one possession in the final five minutes. Two ways of looking at it (feel free to add more of your own):

1. The Suns are more confident with an insulator between them and their opponent. Once the other team makes it really tight the Suns lose their equanimity and doubt creeps in. The Suns only have one win, against Utah, when they've trailed in the final five minutes. In these games the Suns are 1-4.

2. The Suns have played well enough in those fourth quarters that their opponents couldn't manage to scrap their way back in. The Suns led from wire to wire down the stretch and showed great poise as closers. In these games the Suns are 4-0.

Speaking of closers, let's look at how Eric Bledsoe has performed in these late game situations to earn the moniker "Mr. Fourth Quarter."

Portland: 2-3 FG, 4-4 FT, 8 points

Utah: 4-9 FG, 2-4 3FG, 7-8 FT, 17 points (14 straight to close game including game winning three)

OKC: 3-8 FG, 1-5 3FG, 3-4 FT, 10 points

NO: 3-3 FG, 4-4 FT, 10 points

SA: 0-3 FG, 0-1 FT, 0 points

Denver: 3-4 FG, 1-1 3FG, 2-2 FT, 9 points

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NO: 3-4 FG, 1-1 3FG, 7 points

Portland: 1-7 FG, 2 points

Brooklyn: Fourth quarter: 1-4 FG, 0-3 3FG, 2 points. OT: 0-1 3FG, 0 points

After a parching four games to begin the campaign, EB has been tepid at best. Through four games Bledsoe had scored 45 points on 12-23 shooting. Doubly dazzling was his 18-20 mark from the charity stripe. Add in the surreal performance to close out the Jazz and Blade was playing as well as anyone in the league in crunch time.

Then he tapered off. The next five games produced just 18 points. In fact, Bledsoe had 16 of those in the Suns' two wins during that stretch and only four points in the three losses. Eric is a combined 8-23 (35%) and, maybe most disconcerting, has only attempted **three** free throws.

Flashback.

In 2012-13, Shannon Brown started off the season as that team's "Mr. Fourth Quarter." He had 10 points against Detroit on 5-8 shooting and went mushroom cloud against the Bobcats with 18 points on 6-8 shooting (and 6-6 from three point range) against Charlotte. Then he had 12 more against Cleveland on 5-7 shooting (with one made three and one made free throw). Then he had eight points on 4-6 shooting against the Nuggets.

After all that the Suns stood at 4-4 and Shannon "The Cannon" Brown had cumulatively scored 48 points in the fourth quarters of the four wins. He was shooting 20-29 from the field (69%).

Yes, that actually happened... go check for yourself if you don't believe me. For comparison, Bledsoe's best four scoring totals in the Suns five wins still only netted him 44 points on 12-24 shooting.

The oft maligned, and deservedly so, Brown Bomber was mad clutch. For those of you not

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familiar with these nicknames, they are more stinging jabs than signs of affection. Brown's ability to over-dribble and end up taking a difficult shot grated on the soul. We can all be thankful that the current Suns don't have a guard with even remotely similar tendencies... As aforementioned, disturbing interesting parallels.

Not to say that EB hasn't provided defense and intangibles that Brown didn't, but those of you who remember that Charlotte game know that Brown was every bit as responsible for single-handedly winning that game as Bledsoe was for the victory against Utah.

The point of this isn't to suggest that Brown is even remotely close to EB talentwise. It would be lunacy to suggest that Blade isn't a far superior player, but this little stitch in time did make me chortle. Besides, ball-stopping and decision making have been issues at times...

Making sense out of the senseless

So what does this all mean? Maybe something, maybe nothing.

Last season's team played a bunch of close games early on and fared well behind the heroic exploits of Shannon Brown.

This season's team played a bunch of close games early on and fared well behind the heroic exploits of Eric Bledsoe.

The Suns failed to execute in the waning moments of both games last week. Eric Bledsoe, P.J. Tucker and Markieff Morris all missed last second shots in Portland, while Goran Dragic and Channing Frye couldn't connect against Brooklyn. Any one of those five shots goes in and the Suns (very probably) go 1-1 instead of 0-2.

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Do these types of games help build the confidence of a young team? It didn't seem to help the veterans last season. After starting 7-8 they crumbled, with losing streaks of seven, six and five games stretching through December.

But that team also got rode hard and put away wet a couple times in the early going, something we haven't witnessed from this season's team so far. Against the Nuggets and Nets things appeared to be unraveling, but the youngsters weathered the storm.

Bledsoe is seemingly regressing to his norm. After 9 games he has scored 65 fourth quarter points. After averaging 11.3 through four games, he averaged just four in the next five contests. That's still an average of 7.2 per game. That would most likely put him top five in the league in that category if he could maintain that pace. Which means this nine games is still probably above average.

Since the success of the team so far has been closely tied to the performance of Bledsoe, this may not bode well. Less than three weeks ago doubts swirled about EB's ability to succeed in a starting role. Now he is expected to carry a team of tyros. That's a tall order.

The Suns and Blade came back down to earth a little last week. Will the team return to a more celestial state or burrow into the outer crust? If the at least tenuous similarities I covered in this disquisition continue... The Suns better grab some gloves so they don't get blisters from that shovel.