

## Phoenix Suns playing exciting basketball, still waiting for fans to come

Written by

Sunday, 22 December 2013 09:17 -

---



No longer do the Phoenix Suns have a rabid fan base that fills the arena every night. Even now that the team is playing well, the fans still have not turned back to face the sun.

Just three years removed from nearly fifteen straight years of capacity crowds, the [Phoenix Suns](#) no longer come close to selling out any of their games.

In fact, the Suns are seeing fewer fans - just 14,203 per game per ESPN - than at any time [since 1988-89 season \(more on this later\)](#). Never has this stadium been so empty.

Think about this: The Suns are selling [1,200 fewer tickets per game than LAST SEASON](#) - otherwise commonly referred to as the worst Suns season since the 80s drug scandals.

"It's an inevitable cycle that you go through in this business," Suns President of Basketball Operations Lon Babby said before last night's game. "And it's hard to do it without enduring some pain."

The Suns are paying for that pain this season.

It's quite the study in social behavior, and seems to indicate that human nature is a little bit lagging in turning inaction to action. While the level of play dipped from 2011-2013, attendance declined at a slower rate than the team's record. When the team was worst last year, attendance barely dropped from the year before. But now, a year later, the fans seem to be getting back at the team by turning their heads just when the team is worth watching again.

## Phoenix Suns playing exciting basketball, still waiting for fans to come

Written by

Sunday, 22 December 2013 09:17 -

---

But the true answer to the lagging attendance is in the business model.

First of all, games are played nearly every other day and can occur on any day of the week. It's not like the NFL, where there are only 8 games to choose from and nearly all of them occur on a Sunday. This is the NBA, with 41 games to choose from various nights over a six month span.

Second, fans are generally lazy. With so many games to choose from, they are most to attend a game for which they already have tickets. That's why teams in all sports sell up to 90% of their seats as season tickets, asking fans to prepay for the entire season (or a portion) before it even starts. If you leave it up to fans to get off their couch for a 4-hour commitment on a weeknight on a whim, versus just watching the game on their TV, you'll be sorely disappointed with the results.

And finally, season tickets are sold before the season starts. So, the level of tickets you sell is more a product of expectations than actual results. Fans came into this season expecting poor results. National pundits and Vegas oddsmakers tabbed this team as one of the worst in the NBA.

It could be that higher attendance is a full year away. Back when Hornacek and KJ began the Suns' revival after the drug scandal in the 80s, fans [didn't start coming to games in droves until the 1989-90 season](#). The exciting 88-89 team finished 55-27 but saw only 12,465 fans a night (about 3,000 below capacity), barely 1,000 more than the low water mark in seasons prior. But that was the year after the scandal, and fans needed time to re-acclimate and buy new season tickets.

These 2013-14 Suns are in a similar boat to the 1988-89 Suns team. Just like then, this younger, faster team is now 16-10, producing a season's worth of exciting highlights - timely threes, thunderous dunks, skyscraper blocks, speedy fast breaks - in every fun-filled game.

"We play at a faster pace," Babby said, comparing this team to last year's team. "And we're dramatically more athletic. I think it's fair to say it's a more enjoyable product to watch."

## Phoenix Suns playing exciting basketball, still waiting for fans to come

Written by

Sunday, 22 December 2013 09:17 -

---

And here is the Phoenix Suns' current conundrum. Even with an exciting team on the floor, too few season tickets were already sold to guarantee solid attendance every night. And as a result, this exciting young team is playing in front of at least 5,000 empty seats a night.

I asked Lon Babby when they thought fans would start showing up again in droves.

"I hope soon," Babby said. "The fans that have come out have been very enthusiastic. I've noticed TV ratings are up. I would imagine after the holidays, attendance will pick up. I know if people come out here and watch us, it's a very entertaining product. If you like NBA basketball, you're going to like the Phoenix Suns."

The problem is the lack of season tickets sold. Lon's right that attendance picks up every spring. Even during last year's horrible second half, attendance rose a great deal after the holidays, enough to increase the overall season average by more than 800 fans night by the end of the year.

"When the fans are ready to give us that, we will definitely embrace it," Babby said. "All I can do in my job is say we are putting out a product that is worthy of that support. We're through a dark tunnel. And we're out the other end of it. I'd say that the Sun is shining now. I would hope the fans would embrace that as we begin that journey."

Right now, the Suns are competing with the NFL, the local Cardinals, ASU Sun Devils (both football and basketball), and hockey Coyotes for attention. All of them are winners this year, so it's difficult to get the attention of a jilted fan base.

But the signs are there, if not in ticket sales quite yet.

"As I walk around town, I feel much more enthusiasm, much more supported. People think somehow over the summer I got smarter," he quipped, with a chuckle. "I like that. At my age, it's good if you can get smarter over a summer."

## Phoenix Suns playing exciting basketball, still waiting for fans to come

Written by

Sunday, 22 December 2013 09:17 -

---

Now it's time to support the team on the court. It's time to come down to the arena and watch the team grow right in front of you.

"That's a good team," [Mavericks](#) coach Rick Carlisle said last night. "To come back from 21 down to beat Denver in Denver, you have to be good."

These Suns are winning. They're now 9-4 at home, so you're very likely to watch a great game and come away charged up with their performance. A young team loves the support from the fans in the stands, too.

"To be honest with you, we need that fan support to buoy our performance," Babby said. "We need a genuine home court advantage. You run into that on the road, whether you're in Golden State or Utah or Portland, you're walking into the lion's den. We need to have that environment here."

Get down to the game, folks! The Suns host the Lakers on Monday, and then the Philadelphia 76ers (who actually ARE tanking the season) on Thursday.