

This Phoenix Suns team breathes fire from The Dragon Goran Dragic, will survive without Bledsoe

Written by
Friday, 10 January 2014 08:50 -



Lost amid the Eric Bledsoe hoopla: For the fourth consecutive year, Phoenix Suns point guard Goran Dragic is exceeding expectations and raising the ceiling of his career. He is now knocking on the door of an All-Star berth.

Over the past five years, [Phoenix Suns](#) fans have witnessed the growth of a true NBA talent from his infancy to the verge of an All-Star berth.

Lost amid the [Eric Bledsoe](#) hoopla, the Phoenix Suns still have their heart and soul running the point guard position. After this season, as he witnesses players dropping like flies around him, we may have to give [Goran Dragic](#) a new nickname: The Iron Dragon.

Five years ago, the Suns had a "deer in the headlights" 22-year old rookie named Goran Dragic playing ineffective spot minutes behind All-Star Steve Nash. For context, that's three yrs older than [Archie Goodwin](#) and two years older than [Alex Len](#) are right now. Dragic couldn't dribble the basketball out of a paper bag, couldn't shoot well, and couldn't finish at the rim. And as the point guard, he couldn't generate many points for the team, couldn't use his off hand for anything, shot just 39% from the field and had nearly as many turnovers as assists.

But he flashed some moxie despite the Opie looks. When a player ([Jamaal Tinsley](#) , I believe) passed the ball between Dragic's legs, Goran returned the favor on the next play. When a [Kings](#) player stole the ball in open court from Dragic, the Slovenian ran him down to take the ball back. There were flashes, but they were few and far between. A noted columnist from ESPN famously (infamously?) wrote that "Goran Tragic* is the worst player in the NBA".

**could this nickname be the source of career-long mispronunciation of Drah-gitch's name?*

This Phoenix Suns team breathes fire from The Dragon Goran Dragic, will survive without Bledsoe

Written by

Friday, 10 January 2014 08:50 -

A year later, during the 2009-10 season, Dragic improved. He became a viable backup to Nash, and even carried the team through occasional stretches of brilliance during their 28-7 late season run to the playoffs. And when the playoffs came - Dragic's one and only playoff experience to date - he was a darling of the nation. To this day, his most memorable national moment was that fourth Q against San Antonio. You know the one.

In the span of one season, our little Slovenian's nickname changed from "Tragic" to "The Dragon".

After a dismal start to the 2010-11 season and a bad trade to Houston, the Dragon got his first chance to run a team in the final weeks of the season when Kyle Lowry got hurt. He #killedit to the tune of a triple-double capper, but Houston came up just short of the playoffs.

I thought Dragic had reached his ceiling - a good backup point guard who could flash brilliance on occasion, but never become a full-time starter.

I was wrong.

In 2012, Dragic's 4th NBA season, he got an even bigger chance for Houston when Lowry missed most of the second half to injury. In 28 starts, Dragic averaged 18 points and 8.4 assists in 36 minutes per game. He nearly single-handedly carried the short-handed [Rockets](#) to the playoffs, starting the last 26 games of that season and missing the playoffs in the final week.

As Dragic hit free agency, I once again thought he'd reached a new, but distinct, ceiling - a quality starting point guard who had probably played a tiny bit over his head in Houston. He still wasn't a consistent shooter or great set-up passer like his former mentor, Nash. I also thought Dragic's balls-out style might not last a full season of wear and tear. In terms of league rankings, Dragic was maybe the 15th best point guard in the league. Not great. Not bad either.

Again, I was wrong.

This Phoenix Suns team breathes fire from The Dragon Goran Dragic, will survive without Bledsoe

Written by

Friday, 10 January 2014 08:50 -

He lasted the whole season as the starter in Phoenix and became the epitome of what Suns fans wanted from their team - consistent effort, all game long, and a winning attitude. Dragic put up strong numbers considering the lack of talent around him, even setting a career high in all major categories.

And for the fourth year in a row, Dragic was even better in the second half of the season. He averaged 16.1 points and 9.5 assists per game in 26 post-ASG starts, up from 14 and 6.3 before the break. And this was under Hunter and amid a youth movement.

Again, I thought Goran had hit his ceiling. How much better can you be than 16 and 9? When the Suns acquired Eric Bledsoe in the offseason, I figured that Dragic would get more space to operate, but would handle the ball less and overall cap out at his numbers - 15 points and 5 assists or so a night, while Bledsoe stole the spotlight.

Now, in his sixth NBA season, Goran Dragic is once again reaching for a new ceiling. He is now knocking on the doorstep of an All-Star berth, thanks only to the chance that a number of better players will miss the game to injury, such as Kobe Bryant and [Russell Westbrook](#) .

In 29 first-half starts, Dragic has blown away his prior numbers. He's putting up a career high 19 points per game along with 6 assists, despite sharing time with Bledsoe as expected. The extra 4.5 points per game over last year may not seem like much, but it's the difference between go-to scorer and supporting player.

And we haven't even hit the second half of the season!

To recap, Goran Dragic has been better every single year of his career in the second half of the season. Check out the splits. Despite playing for his country every summer, "The Dragon" gains power as the season wears on.

Can the Suns survive without Eric Bledsoe for a time? If you read articles and fan reaction, the clear answer is no. Without Bledsoe, the Suns will "Bled" out, they say.

This Phoenix Suns team breathes fire from The Dragon Goran Dragic, will survive without Bledsoe

Written by

Friday, 10 January 2014 08:50 -

But I say different.

I say that the Suns will continue to rise on the fire breathed by The Dragon. His career trajectory is still rising, despite the ceilings I have imposed on his career.

The kid who arrived in the NBA as a deer-in-the-headlights PG despite already being 22 years old may now be busting down the door of an All-Star berth in his sixth NBA season.

Eric Bledsoe will be missed. But if Leandro Barbosa, [Gerald Green](#) , [Channing Frye](#) and [P.J. Tucker](#) can continue to space the floor by making a solid chunk of their three-pointers, and if Barbosa and [Ish Smith](#) can handle some of the PG load while Dragic gets a breather, there's every reason to think Dragic can carry this team to the playoffs. A mere .500 record from now on will get the Suns 45 wins, which should be good enough to make it.

Dragic has experienced the postseason only once in his career. In three of the other four seasons, he's come up just short in the final week.

He gets better in the second half, every single season. Despite missing Bledsoe, he's still surrounded by better talent than he's had since 2010. He's got a coach channeling his own former playing days - days that included an All-Star berth - into the Slovenian guard built just like he was in both temper and talent.

This Suns team is fueled by Fire, not Bled.

Goran Dragic will continue to improve. He just needs the rest of the team to deliver the way they have all season.