

Phoenix Suns not dead yet, despite 1-3 start to road trip

Written by

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When Eric Bledsoe went down to a knee injury, many in the basketball world said "uh oh". Now that the Suns have gone 2-4 without Bledsoe, those folks are nodding in assent. But is the problem really all about Bledsoe?

The [Phoenix Suns](#) reached their high water mark of the season at eight games over .500 (giving them a 19-11 record) nearly two weeks ago with a drubbing of the [Los Angeles Clippers](#) in LA in which the Suns took a big first-half lead and never looked back. Their hot shooting and scrappy defense made the Clippers look pedestrian.

The future looked quite bright, highlighted with the promise of opening 2014 with eight consecutive games against losing teams.

But since then, very little has gone right for the season's biggest surprise team. [Eric Bledsoe](#) injured his right knee in that Clipper game and has not played since. Compounding the problem, the Suns went through a lull defensively while they hung their hats on hot shooting - a recipe for failure as a season-long road trip began.

While the loss of Eric Bledsoe may ultimately be the death knell to the Phoenix Suns' playoff hopes, or at least any chance of climbing into a top-4 seed, their 1-3 record in the last 4 games has been more a perfect storm of negative indicators than any long-term indication of failure.

Delayed start to 4-games-in-5-days

It's hard enough to go on a season-long road trip of 5 games. Harder still to play those 5 games in 7 nights, starting with the first 4 in only 5 nights.

But the difficulty factor goes up another notch when the weather is so bad you don't even travel

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to the first city until 6 hours before tipoff. That kind of travel ruins routines, and adds fatigue. I know it's only riding on a plane, but anyone who's traveled knows that for some unknown reason you're always tired at the end of a day of travel.

This factor is a small one, to be sure. A young team shouldn't need a lot of rest. But routines are routines, and if you're off kilter you don't play as consistently.

Playing 4 of the league's best 7 rebounding teams

We all know the Suns have trouble rebounding. I wrote last week that the Suns, already 28th in the league in defensive rebound rate (% of time they pull down an opponent miss) over all games (72%). They get absolutely killed in their losses to the tune of only pulling down 65% of opponent misses. That means 35% of the time the opponent gets inside position and an easy putback attempt.

During the first 4 games of the road trip that could easily have been a 4-game losing streak, their defensive rebounding rate was good only in that Minnesota win. In the other losses, it's been more of the same: 68%, 69% and 59%.

In the six games since the pasting of the Clippers, the Suns have faced a top rebounding team in 5 of them (Milwaukee the only exception).

Memphis (twice), Chicago, Minnesota and Detroit occupy 4 of the top 7 slots in rebound rate - and the Suns have gone 1-4 against those teams.

Cold Shooting

Normally this season, the Suns counter those putbacks against them by running down and making a fast break layup (league high 19 FB points a game) or a three-pointer (2nd in league with 31% of all their shots being 3s) to more than offset those little 2-point putbacks.

Between the fast breaks and the 3s, the Suns had the league's 5th highest Effective Field Goal percentage at one point, which factors in the higher value 3-point shot.

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The idea is that the opponent should be so worried about the Suns fast breaks and shotmaking they abandon the offensive boards to get back on D as quickly as possible.

But when those shots aren't falling as often, the Suns offensive advantage is negated.

Over this 2-4 stretch, the Suns have made only 42% of their shots while allowing 46% to the other team. The Suns are still making 3s and defending 3s okay, but facing great rebounding teams has slowed down the pace and reduced the Suns fast break to a trickle.

Long term impact over the second half

The Suns plan is to overcome those great rebounding teams with fast breaks and 3s. While the 3s are still there, over the past week the fast break has been an issue. Partly at fault is the opponents. Great rebounding teams make you stay in the lane for boards rather than leak out for the break.

Partly at fault are the Eric Bledsoe replacements. While Bledsoe is one of the best in the league at creating and finishing in the paint, [Ish Smith](#) and [Leandro Barbosa](#) have been less than stellar in that area. Goran Dragic is still the Dragon, but he needs help running the offense over 48 minutes.

Barbosa used to be one of the best on the break and finishing at the rim, so the hope is that Barbosa just needs time to acclimate back into the NBA game. He's got his speed back, but his timing is off and he doesn't yet know the offense or defense enough to make a difference.

Given time, more home games and opponents lower down the rebounding food chain, the Suns should be able to weather this storm thanks to their hustle and shooting.

Of the next several opponents, only the Indiana Pacers are a really good defensive rebounding team. The Knicks, Lakers, Mavericks, Nuggets and Wizards won't be able to control the boards like recent opponents.

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Factor in that all but one of those games are in the warm desert, look for the Suns shooting to rebound as well.