

Phoenix Suns experience quantum leap forward from Gentry's firing to Hornacek's COY candidacy

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A year ago, the Suns lame duck GM fired the coach. Now, the Suns boast candidates for Executive of the Year (Ryan McDonough) and Coach of the Year (Jeff Hornacek). How does that happen in only 365 days?

One year ago today, it came down to a mutual decision between the owner, president, and the coach to part ways and head in a different direction with the head coaching job. After five seasons, 148 wins, and a trip to the Western Conference Finals, this is the way [Alvin Gentry's](#) tenure with the [Phoenix Suns](#) comes to an end.

As our own [Kris Habbas put it a year ago](#) :

To modify the great T.S. Elliott, "this is how the 2012-2013 season ends, not with a bang, but with a loss to the [Milwaukee Bucks](#) ."

The question was who would replace Gentry. When he announced the firing, Suns President of Basketball Operations Lon Babby made it clear that the hire would come from within.

From early reports it looks like the Suns like [Lindsey Hunter](#) internally, but they are hesitating on that move in order to give him a "clean slate" starting next season according to Yahoo! Sports Adrian Wojnarowski reports:

Adrian Wojnarowski (@WojYahooNBA) tweeted at 11:15 AM on Fri, Jan 18, 2013:
After firing of Alvin Gentry today, top candidates to become Suns interim coach: assistants [Els](#)

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[ton Turner](#)

and Lindsey Hunter, sources say.

Adrian Wojnarowski (@WojYahooNBA) tweeted at 11:17 AM on Fri, Jan 18, 2013:
Suns front office installed Hunter into organization and see him as future head coach there.
Turner is a favorite of owner, Robert Sarver.

That was on Thursday, January 18. The Suns did not actually name Hunter until two days later after "internal interviews" were completed. But Hunter was Blanks' decision the whole way. Bobby made it clear that it was Blanks' decision to make, with input and guidance from himself and managing partner Robert Sarver.

"He was the right guy to give us a jolt," GM Lance [Blanks said at the time](#) when asked what Lindsey Hunter brought over the other candidates. "There were certainly other qualified and safe candidates. We felt Lindsey would give us the type of leadership we needed. We can work with him, as we go through this process with the team and the organization."

Hunter was a disaster in terms of public relations, but despite playing without starting center [Marcin Gortat](#) for most of the second half of the season he was only one game worse at 12-29 vs. Gentry's 13-28.

Clearly, the problems went beyond the coaching staff. Players did not mesh well together - on or off the court. It was a bad mix of talent with too many years of experience to accept losing. Many veterans "checked out" when things didn't go their way, including playing time. They were good at identifying problems but didn't come up with any solutions that worked either.

With only a couple of young and inexperienced players on the roster expected to perform - rookie [Kendall Marshall](#) and second year player [Markieff Morris](#) - the veterans' attitude rubbed the wrong way and no one outperformed expectations.

The makeup of the team falls flat on the former GM, president Lon Babby and owner Robert

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Sarver. Of the three, though, only one of them ever purported himself to be a talent evaluator.

Death of the old Suns

In hindsight, the firing of Alvin Gentry was the end of a prior era. The end of unmeetable expectations. The end of squeezing blood from a stone.

Until that time, the Suns were expected to be a playoff team. Any loss was magnified. Rifts were overblown. Fingers were pointed. The winning was gone but the expectations never left. Gentry was a WCF coach. Many of the rotation players were grizzled veterans with playoff pedigree. The GM expected playoffs too.

But 13-28 is 13-28. Going old without getting results is the worst place to be in the NBA.

"It was not a happy time," Babby admits.

While January 18, 2013 was the inception of a new future, the incubation period over the rest of the season was painful. The Suns rode out the year with largely the same cast, though they started shedding age for youth where they could (Telfair out, [Marcus Morris](#) in; Marshall into the rotation).

The season was painful, but even in that second half you could see a glimmer of the future. Disaster can beget change, so the more disastrous the results the more likely key players would be changed out. Blanks was a sitting duck, as was his hand-picked "back to basics" coach Lindsey Hunter.

The end-of-season media day was a death watch - with every player, to a man, lamenting the makeup of the roster and hoping for major changes - but it was simply the next step in an evolution.

Fast forward

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Now we jump forward to today. Only one year later (eight months since the end of the season), the Suns have morphed from being the second oldest lottery team in the league (hello, [Dallas Mavericks](#)) to one of the youngest playoff-caliber teams in the league. On paper, the Suns are just the seventh youngest team, but the others are clear lotto teams. They are younger than a year ago, devoid of me-first attitudes and brimming with energy.

A year later, no matter how good today is, you know that tomorrow is even better. Draft picks, cap space and flexibility are all waiting to be used this summer to improve the team further.

How the hell does this happen in such a short amount of time?

Striking it rich with GM Ryan McDonough and coach Jeff Hornacek sure helps. All else that's gone well since then was beget by those hirings.

After acquiring three key rotation players for a playoff caliber team - [Eric Bledsoe](#) , [Miles Plumlee](#) , [Gerald Green](#) ,
- and another two 2014 first round picks for some of those mismatched veterans (Gortat, Scola and Dudley), McDonough is clearly a finalist for Executive of the Year.

But even more than that, these guys are personable and engaging with the media and public and are much-loved by the players. To a man, they credit the coach and his staff for making them better players and a successful team.

There's only one way those two guys can make such a difference in such a short amount of time. The foundation of a franchise was already here: world-renowned training staff, first-class facilities, a committed and energized support staff and many are still in the basketball operations department that were here in the dark days too, including Trevor Buckstein (who envisioned the trade that got Bledsoe), college scout John Treloar and advance scout Bubba Burrage.

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"Much of the essence of the infrastructure was in place," Babby said. "That is why Ryan and Jeff understood the opportunity that was here."

Kudos to Lon Babby and Robert Sarver for getting it right this time. I guess what comes up must come down, and vice versa. The Suns were so dark a year ago that it stands to reason their future would be so bright today.

While Lon Babby took all the heat in recent seasons, he set the stage for the revival amid difficult circumstances. Laid out on the table for Ryan McDonough were a host of game pieces for use in the offseason: a grizzled veteran on a great contract ([Luis Scola](#)), a "glue guy" small forward for a playoff team also on a great contract ([Jared Dudley](#)), a starting-quality center for a playoff team on an affordable expiring deal (Marcin Gortat), five extra draft picks (three #1s, two #2s), future cap space and owner willing swallow their only untradeable deal (Sarver/Beasley). All that was waiting for McDonough to use.

"I don't think those guys would have come here if it wasn't set up for success," Babby says. "[Ryan] did things to accelerate [the rebuild]. We were in really good shape, but we took a quantum leap forward this summer."

The biggest surprise is the coaching ability of Jeff Hornacek and his staff. Everyone knew that Hornacek was a great PR move who had the acumen to be a very good coach someday. But for Hornacek and his staff to be this good and this successful so early is almost unprecedented.

"The changes in the coaching staff have been the most dramatic," Babby said. He spoke of the teaching abilities of the staff as the biggest improvement, without going so far as calling them a surprise. He said they knew the coaches would be good, but hadn't expected the quick results.

"Hornacek has done a fantastic job," Dallas coach [Rick Carlisle](#) said on Friday night. "He will be one of the favorites for Coach of the Year."

"The good thing about this year is that everyone is comfortable with their role," Babby said,

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citing Hornacek's communication skills to get the players on board regardless of their personal stats and opportunities. "No one is grouching for minutes. The team has been beautifully coached and they've played better than anyone expected."

A year later, every day is better than the last. And for the foreseeable future, tomorrow is better than that day. Six first round picks in the next two years. Loads of cap space. And, best of all, young rotation players who can play effectively for a winning team, making them all tradeable assets to get that next big Phoenix Suns star.

The Suns may already have their star of the future in Eric Bledsoe, to whom they hold the rights

"There's really a positive that came out of [the injury]," Babby said. "The mutual respect of going through that process together is a positive. That enhanced our interactions with him and his agent. Having been an agent really helped. I understood where his mindset was."

The future is bright. No matter how good today is, tomorrow is better. Yes, the Suns lost another close one last night (110-107 to Dallas) as they face teams who are playing their best ball to beat the Suns - quite a change from surprising people early in the season.

The Suns are still 22-17, in 8th place in the playoff seedings with a long way to go (43 games), but they face a difficult remainder of the season unless they can get healthy again. They are 16-8 with Bledsoe and Dragic in the same lineup vs. 6-9 without him and facing four more weeks (at least) of the same.

Still, the foundation is set. The Suns have a reputation of playing a smart scheme that relies on high-efficiency shots - three pointers and shots at the rim. And they are developing a personality that must be respected.

"[The Suns] are a hard nosed, hard playing team," Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle said. "They are one of the more physical teams in the league. People don't talk much about that. They defend well. They go after rebounds."

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Despite losing 5 of their last 7 and 6 of 10 overall, the Suns still have a +2 scoring margin over the last 10 games, showing that they don't back down.

That's the mark of a good team, and one with a very good future.



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